

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
SIXTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2017 - 2019

COMPRISING PERIOD
10 July 2017—20 July 2017

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 627

SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 10 July 2017

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Reserve Centres

1. **Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with local authorities and the devolved Administrations on reserve centre closures; and if he will make a statement. [900293]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mark Lancaster): At the first Defence questions of the new Parliament, may I remind the House of my interest, namely that I am in my 29th year of service in the Army Reserve?

The Ministry of Defence regularly holds discussions with local authorities and the devolved Administrations on reserves. That includes engaging with all stakeholders on sites that are earmarked for closure or for the establishment of new reserve units. The release of sites no longer required by the Ministry of Defence will free up land for new housing and raise money to reinvest in our armed forces.

Jim McMahon: Like the Minister, my father was a Territorial Army reservist, so I know the importance of the reserve. Would it not make more sense, rather than jumping to a closure and then contacting the devolved Administrations, to have a pre-consultation to make sure that where facilities are being reviewed across the board—ambulance stations, fire stations and so on—we have a single estates strategy for public sector assets?

Mark Lancaster: Of course, we do engage with local authorities to the best of our ability, but no final decisions have been made in the Army Reserve Refine programme. It would therefore be premature to engage with local authorities to say which, if any, Army Reserve centres are closing. However, that piece of work on the reserves brings good news as well, so I am delighted to take this opportunity to announce the creation of two new infantry battalions as a result of it: 4th Battalion the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, whose headquarters will be at Redhill, and 8 Rifles Battalion, whose headquarters will be at Bishop Auckland.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I offer my hon. Friend very warm congratulations on his promotion to Minister for the armed forces? As a distinguished and senior officer in the reserve, is he not perfectly placed to make decisions on reserve centre closures?

Mark Lancaster: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his warm words. As his former Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department for International Development, I know only too well of his contribution to the comprehensive approach during his tenure there. It is rare as a Minister to be appointed to a Department one actually knows something about. On that basis, I am delighted to be here. It is great to be in this position and I hope to use any experience I have.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): May I, too, congratulate the Minister on seemingly knowing what he is talking about?

In recent days I became aware, via the office of the deputy lord lieutenant of the county of Dunbartonshire that he had informed the provost of West Dunbartonshire, as the local government's civic leader, that armed forces veterans' day would not take place due to there being no capacity in the armed forces to deliver it. As the Member of Parliament for West Dunbartonshire, it gives me grave cause for concern that veterans in local families in West Dunbartonshire, including those in my own family who have served, will not be given the appropriate thanks by their local community. Will the Minister, on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, advise me and other Members of the House whose local communities may have been unable to hold veterans' day that this will not happen again?

Mark Lancaster: Armed Forces Day has become quite a success, so I am disappointed to hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I visited Bangor in Northern Ireland and my colleagues have visited other places in the United Kingdom. The Armed Forces Day centring on Liverpool this year was a particular success. However, I am concerned by what he says and would like to think that all our units, whether Army Reserve units, Regular units or cadet forces, will do whatever they can to support Armed Forces Day. I will certainly look into what he has said.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a crucial criterion when considering dismissing or abandoning reserve centres is to ensure that our reserve centres are as close as possible to the reserve soldiers who will man them, so that they do not have to travel far?

Mark Lancaster: Of course, our reserves have become very much a success over recent years. Over the last year, some 5,000 extra reserves were recruited—an increase of some 5% on the Army Reserve of 2016. One of the great challenges we face is to ensure that the footprint is equal across the country. That is why the Army Reserve Refine piece of work that is going on is so important. One of the principal aims is to ensure that the footprint is even across the country.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Abertillery in my constituency is home to the 211 Battery, which has the reserve's only unmanned air systems operators. I understand that the Department is scrapping the Black Hornet unmanned aerial vehicle, but is still using the Desert Hawk model. Will that have an impact on the successful and popular Blaenau Gwent-based unit?

Mark Lancaster: As I said earlier, I think that the reserves Refine piece is overwhelmingly a success story. I am sorry that I am not currently in a position to give the House the final details, but I will go out of my way to ensure that all Members are informed in advance of any changes in their local units.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. and gallant Friend has referred to a footprint for the reserve forces. That is terribly important, because, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), they have to live near their bases. Reserve centres are also very useful as the outward face of the British Army throughout the nation where there is not otherwise any military presence. They are often co-located

with, for instance, cadet battalions, and they have a huge usefulness quite apart from their military usefulness. Does it not concern my hon. Friend that what he described as a footprint may become a toehold?

Mark Lancaster: I am quite confident that at the end of the reserves Refine process, the footprint will still be substantial across the United Kingdom. We are not considering major closures across the UK, and I would hate to imply that that is the correct impression. Indeed, today I announced the creation of two new reserve units. I think that, as we continue to increase the size of our reserves, the story is a positive one.

NATO: Estonia and Poland

2. Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What contribution the Government are making to NATO's reassurance measures in Estonia and Poland. [900294]

6. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What contribution the Government are making to NATO's reassurance measures in Estonia and Poland. [900298]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The United Kingdom is supporting NATO's enhanced Forward Presence, which is designed to defend our allies and deter our adversaries. About 800 UK personnel based on armoured infantry form the core of our battlegroup in Estonia. In Poland, a British reconnaissance squadron is part of the US-led battlegroup. Both deployments are defensive but combat-capable.

Tom Tugendhat: I am sure that my right hon. Friend welcomed, as I did, the congressional vote that renewed the United States' commitment to article 5. Will my right hon. Friend say a little about Britain's commitment to it, particularly in relation to units such as the Estonian armed forces, alongside whom I—and many other Members—had the privilege to serve in, for instance, Afghanistan?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is good that both Congress and, now, the President have committed themselves to article 5, the most important principle of NATO. In Washington on Friday, Secretary Mattis and I agreed to continue our work together to modernise NATO and give it more focus on counter-terrorism and hybrid warfare. As my hon. Friend has said, one of the reasons that our contribution to the enhanced Forward Presence is based in Estonia is indeed our good experience of working with Estonian forces in Helmand, Afghanistan.

Daniel Kawczynski: Joint military exercises in the Suwalki gap are obviously very welcome, as are rotational deployments of troops in Poland, but when will the United Kingdom use its senior position in NATO to press that organisation for a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland?

Sir Michael Fallon: Our defence relationship with Poland is close. Since the beginning of 2016 I have met Minister Macierewicz at least five times, and we aim to sign a defence treaty with Poland later this year. NATO, of course, already has a small permanent base in Poland, the Multinational Corps Northeast headquarters in Szczecin, to which the United Kingdom contributes personnel.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I very much support what the Defence Secretary has said about the contribution that we are making in respect of NATO in Estonia and Poland, but having spoken to a couple of constituents at the weekend, I believe that the Government, and all of us, have a job of work to do to explain to the British public the importance of NATO and the continuing need for us to be vigilant in eastern Europe.

Sir Michael Fallon: I absolutely agree. We need to keep restating the case for NATO, and it is sometimes sad to see the case for it being questioned. We must restate its importance. It was good to hear the President reinforce that in his speech in Warsaw on Friday, but I think that all of us in the House have a responsibility to explain why our troops are being deployed to Poland and Estonia, why our Typhoons are based in Romania this summer, and why we are committing Royal Navy ships to the standing maritime groups this year.

BrIDGET Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): One of the biggest threats facing all NATO member states is the growing sophistication and volume of cyber-attacks. What collective action are the Secretary of State and his colleagues taking to counter that threat?

Sir Michael Fallon: As I said, Secretary Mattis and I have agreed that NATO needs to prioritise its work on cyber and other forms of hybrid warfare, which is just as important as its conventional deployments. We are now doing that; that work was agreed in principle at the Warsaw summit a year ago, and we continue to urge other members to do that, too. In addition, we have offered to put Britain's offensive cyber capabilities at the service of NATO, if required.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): These deployments are certainly defensive, as the Secretary of State stated, but they will be represented as offensive by the Russians. What measures are the Government taking to keep open a line of communication with the Russians, to make it absolutely clear to them that this would not be happening but for their own conduct in Ukraine and elsewhere?

Sir Michael Fallon: NATO is, as my right hon. Friend knows, a defensive alliance and these deployments are defensive in nature. It is important in respect of Russia that we explain these deployments and the purpose of them, and we are transparent about the number of personnel and the units involved. To that end, we already have machinery in place whereby our vice-chief of the defence staff has regular discussions with his opposite number to explain the deployments and ensure that there is no misunderstanding about them.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As this is the first Defence questions of the new Parliament, may I begin by putting on record the Scottish National party's welcome for the announcement on Type 26s, and also welcome the fact that Scotland is, of course, the only part of the UK that can build these complex ships?

On the issue of cyber, what is the Secretary of State's assessment of what the President of America tweeted at the weekend on the idea of an impenetrable cyber security unit? What would that mean for a country such as Estonia, for NATO, and for the United Kingdom?

Sir Michael Fallon: I will take for what it is the hon. Gentleman's welcome for Type 26, on which there is a later question on the Order Paper. Of course, if the SNP had had its way on the nuclear deterrent we would not be needing the Type 26 frigates at all, because they are designed to protect a deterrent that the SNP voted against.

We have cyber expertise in this country, as do Estonia and other countries inside the alliance; we now need to bring that expertise together to counter the cyber-attacks made by our adversaries.

Former Military Personnel: Depression and Suicide

3. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce rates of depression and suicide among former British military personnel. [900295]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): We ask much of our brave service personnel and recognise that service life can cause stress, so we are absolutely committed to providing the necessary mental health and welfare support both during the time of service and on retirement.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his reply, but can he tell us more about the Veterans' Gateway and how it will work alongside the young royals' charity, the Heads Together campaign, to support veterans with mental health problems?

Mr Ellwood: There are 2.5 million veterans in this country and the majority make the transition to civilian life without a problem, but some do not, and that is no fault of their own. There are over 500 main charities providing support, including the one my hon. Friend mentions. The Veterans' Gateway is that initial portal to avoid the confusion of where to turn to. So I welcome this initiative, and would love to take credit for it myself, but I cannot as it was down to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who is now the armed forces Minister.

Mr Speaker: Very good intra-office arrangements; splendid.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): We all owe a great debt of gratitude to those armed forces charities that work so hard supporting former military personnel facing depression and other conditions, but why will the Government not commit to the Royal British Legion's "Count Them In" campaign so that the charities, the statutory services and everyone else can know where former military personnel live?

Mr Ellwood: This is down to a data issue. We are putting together a veterans register, but there is a Data Protection Act issue. We work with Cobseo—the confederation of service charities—and we will be establishing a veterans' board as well, to make sure that we are meeting the needs of our veterans.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): LIBOR funding has been a real lifeline for many charities across the UK, including in Plymouth, where we recently secured £80,000 for a veterans care navigation service. Beyond 2018 that LIBOR funding dries up, however;

what thought has the Minister given to getting veterans care on to a sustainable model, so that we can do our duty by those who serve?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done in this area. He is right to say that the LIBOR funding has been so useful in providing sources of revenue for a number of key projects, and we need to ensure that that continues. I would like to highlight one of those projects, Combat Stress, whose 24/7 phone line has been paid for by LIBOR funds, providing an important service.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) about voluntary groups, I would like to mention two wonderful groups in my constituency—the Veterans Association UK and Veterans in Communities—that do wonderful work with ex-service personnel. What guarantee can the Government give that they will support such organisations in the future?

Mr Ellwood: These organisations play an important part in looking after not only the transition but the veterans themselves, who have given so much during their service life. This is part of our covenant commitment, as the hon. Gentleman will be aware, and I am grateful that he has mentioned those charities. The veterans board will also help with that. All our commitments to do with the covenant are important, but the Veterans' Gateway programme will ensure that such small charities get the publicity they deserve.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The role of all three services of the British armed forces in the liberation of Mosul in Iraq in recent days must be commended. Will the Secretary of State tell me what plans we have for further involvement in Iraq and whether he agrees that the British Army has a crucial role in mentoring and training the Iraqi forces, who are a hugely important ally?

Mr Ellwood: I am a Minister in the Ministry of Defence rather than the Secretary of State, but I am glad that my hon. Friend has such confidence in me. I welcome him to his place. It was a pleasure to join him on the 35th anniversary of the Falklands conflict. He is right to ask what should happen next. As we have seen so many times in various conflicts, there has not been that important transition from war-fighting to peacekeeping, but I know that the Secretary of State is involved in this matter.

Common Defence and Security Policy

4. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his European counterparts on the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the UK's participation in the Common Defence and Security Policy. [900296]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): While still an EU member, we will maintain our contributions to CSDP missions and operations. The Prime Minister has made it clear that after Brexit we want a deep and special partnership with the European Union that encompasses economic and security co-operation. Europe remains our continent, and we

will continue to play our part in its security, through NATO, through our bilateral relationships and through collaboration on defence and research programmes.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. Last week, giving evidence in the Lords, Baroness Ashton, Lord Robertson and Lord Hague all expressed concern about the impact of Brexit on our influence in the world. Does the Secretary of State agree with Lord Hague that we should be seeking permanent membership of the EU's Political and Security Committee to ensure that we can lead a united response on issues such as sanctions on Iran and that we have a united voice on the Falklands?

Sir Michael Fallon: After Brexit, we will still have the largest defence budget and the largest navy in Europe. We have a range of assets and capabilities on which other countries in Europe will want to continue to work with us. So far as foreign policy is concerned, we have not yet got to the point in the negotiations of sorting out exactly what the relationship will be, but let me assure the hon. Lady that I expect to continue our co-operation with my fellow Defence Ministers.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be far better for our European friends to focus on their NATO membership and their commitment to defence spending of 2% of their GDP, rather than trying to create some sort of bogus EU defence force?

Sir Michael Fallon: We all agreed—it was not just Britain—at the time of the Warsaw summit that the European Union and NATO needed to work together to avoid unnecessary duplication. We agreed to co-operate in areas where both could add value but to avoid the need to set up fancy new headquarters and duplicate what was already being done in NATO.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): The European Defence Agency supports the improvement of defence capabilities and provides a forum for European co-operation on research and development. Will the Secretary of State be recommending that we remain a member of the EDA? If not, will he explain what our relationship with it will be, post-Brexit?

Sir Michael Fallon: The European Defence Agency is an important forum, but it is not the only forum in which collaboration takes place. Some of that collaboration is outside the treaty, including some of the work that we have done together on Typhoon and on other major equipment projects. Obviously we expect to have some kind of relationship with the European Defence Agency after Brexit, and that will be discussed in the negotiating process that awaits us.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am pleased to hear my right hon. Friend state that NATO is the cornerstone of our defence alliance. Will he assure me that the pan-European co-operation of defence contractors, such as Thales in my constituency, will continue?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. Several important companies, such as Thales, Leonardo, Airbus and so on, are based both in Europe and in the United Kingdom, and it is important to ensure that their investment and employment here is fully taken into account after Brexit.

Service Accommodation

5. **Fiona Onasanya** (Peterborough) (Lab): What discussions he had with contractors on their delivery of service accommodation; and if he will make a statement.
[900297]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The national housing prime contractor is CarillionAmey and, with support from the MOD, performance levels for service accommodation have been met and sustained. Both organisations meet monthly to review performance, and the Department will penalise poor performance where necessary.

Fiona Onasanya: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. What estimate has he made of the impact of renegotiating the lease in 2021? Will the costs fall on service families?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for calling me the Secretary of State; I hope that if enough people say that, it will actually—*[Interruption.]* I should not say that. I will say, however, that the hon. Lady raises the important issue of ensuring that service family accommodation is up to par. That forms part of our armed forces people proposals, which I will be speaking more about in the House. I hope that we will have the opportunity to review the contract in 2021, but I hope the hon. Lady understands that negotiations will take place and that we will keep the House updated.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that there are no plans to eradicate single-living accommodation for service personnel?

Mr Ellwood: As far as I understand it, there are no plans to remove single-living accommodation, which forms part of the complex offering of service family accommodation. As we have heard, we need to rationalise the defence estate across the country, and we are returning officers and personnel from the Rhine, which will require building projects, including single-living accommodation.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As we have heard, the Armed Forces Pay Review Body's 46th report found that there was an “overwhelming view that the maintenance service provided by CarillionAmey was continuing to fall well short of the needs of Service personnel and their families.”

Service families are tired of Government platitudes, so how bad do things have to get before the Government get a grip on the issue?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place and to the Dispatch Box. He is right to raise that issue. I have just inherited this brief, and there has been concern about standards, in which the Secretary of State has taken a personal interest. We are ensuring that performance levels are up to par, and there will be an opportunity to renegotiate the contract in 2021.

Armed Forces Pay

7. **Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Armed Forces Pay Review Body on levels of pay for the armed forces.
[900299]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Ministers are in regular contact with the Armed Forces Pay Review Body as part of the annual pay round process. I gave oral evidence to the review body last November prior to its 2017 report, and I expect to meet it again prior to its 2018 report.

Mike Amesbury: Given that every Minister, including the Defence Secretary, voted against lifting the pay cap, does that not prove that their praise is more hollow words than good deeds?

Sir Michael Fallon: We all want to see people in public service, including in the armed forces, properly remunerated for what they do, but any pay settlement must obviously take account of taxpayers' interests and be fair to our need to get our deficit under control. We are advised by an independent pay review body that, unlike some other pay review bodies, it is specifically required to look at comparability with the civilian sector and to take account of any evidence regarding recruitment and retention.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): At times when general employment levels rise and unemployment levels fall, and with the continued strength of our economy, it gets more and more difficult to recruit and retain armed forces personnel. Will those be key factors in the consideration of this issue?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right. We are competing for the best of every generation against other sectors of the economy, which of course are growing. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body, in recommending a 1% pay rise in its last report, said:

“We believe that...an increase of one per cent in base pay...will broadly maintain pay comparability with the civilian sector.”

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that last question, figures released to me last week by the Secretary of State's Department in a written answer show that recruitment to our infantry fell by 18% in the last year alone. Does he not accept that not giving a fair pay rise is having a direct impact on recruitment?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is not the view of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. As I have just indicated to the House, the pay review body believes that its settlement, recommended last year, does maintain pay comparability with the civilian sector. Some 8,000 people joined the armed forces in the last 12 months, but when the pay review body comes to make its recommendation for next year, it will of course look specifically at the evidence on recruitment and retention—and it does that in a way that some other review bodies are not able to do.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): After losing her majority at the general election, the Prime Minister has now signalled that she is prepared to work across the House with other parties on areas of agreement. In that spirit, I make a constructive offer. The Government have just introduced the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill in the other place. If the Government agree to amend the Bill to include a real-terms pay rise for our armed forces

personnel, they can count on Labour's support, so will they agree to work with us to give our armed forces the pay award they deserve?

Sir Michael Fallon: We all want to see our armed forces properly remunerated for the service they give us, but it is also incumbent on the hon. Lady to make it very clear how any increase she favours would be properly paid for. That is something she has not done and her party has not done—it certainly did not do it at the last election. The pay review body system is beyond party politics in this House. It is an independent pay review body that looks at comparability with the civilian sector, looks at the issue of retention and recruitment and makes its recommendation, which last year we accepted in full.

Nia Griffith: On the contrary, our manifesto was fully funded, and the Government know that. They know how to raise taxes if they need them. The fact is that the Armed Forces Pay Review Body is severely constrained by the overall 1% cap on public sector pay that the Government have imposed. If the Government will not legislate for a pay rise, will the Secretary of State at least allow the pay review body to carry out a mid-year review and report on what our armed forces should be receiving if the cap were not in place?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am staggered that the hon. Lady thinks her manifesto was fully costed or, indeed, fully funded. There were billions in that manifesto that were due to be borrowed and paid for by future generations. We have implemented the pay review body's recommendation in full for this financial year and, for next year, evidence is already being acquired by the pay review body. I will give my evidence to the pay review body later in the year, and we will see what it recommends.

Royal Navy: Personnel

8. **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment he has made of whether the Royal Navy has sufficient personnel to operate (a) all vessels and (b) the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers.

[900300]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Royal Navy is growing, with 400 more personnel, more ships and new submarines. The Royal Navy remains on track to achieve its manning levels for 2020 and will have sufficient manpower to continue to meet all its operational requirements. That includes ensuring that the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers can always operate safely and effectively.

Mr Baron: Given concerns that we are hollowing out our armed forces' manpower in favour of big-ticket items, what is the Minister, and indeed the Government, doing to ensure that we not only have the manpower to operate those big-ticket items but the ships to protect them when at sea? Global uncertainties abound, and over 90% of our trade is maritime borne.

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend highlights the challenges we face in recruiting in our growing economy, and I am pleased that the Navy's efforts to address shortages of engineers are beginning to show dividends,

through the personnel recovery programme. He will also be aware of our investment in offshore patrol vessels, five of which are currently under construction, and in the new Type 26s—we will cut steel later this month.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In March 2017, total Royal Navy numbers were 710 below their liability, and it is reported that currently only six of our service escort platforms are at sea or fully operational. Given that last year we had a net manpower loss of 750, how can we be assured that we have the right retention policies to operate all of our platforms, when they are so desperately needed?

Mark Lancaster: The Royal Navy is growing; I am pleased that for the first time in a generation the establishment of the Royal Navy will grow, by 400, as I said. I have mentioned the personnel recovery programme, an excellent programme that has sought to address the shortages of engineers through apprenticeships and through affiliation with university technical colleges. It is a long-term programme, but it is working.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The truth is that the Royal Navy has experienced catastrophic cuts in personnel over the past seven years and now the chickens are coming home to roost; the Navy is even asking 55 to 60-year-olds to rejoin on short-term contracts. Will the Government now recognise the error of their ways and recruit, on good wages, the personnel we need? The Prime Minister has asked for ideas from the Opposition, so will the Minister pass my suggestion on to the Prime Minister?

Mark Lancaster: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, this seems to be a common theme when we come to the Dispatch Box: he is always terribly negative. I am determined to try to support our serving personnel and, as I have tried to explain, an awful lot of effort is going in at the moment. This really is the year of the Navy, with more than £3 billion invested in the Royal Navy. We are seeing two new carriers; the fourth Astute class was launched recently; and we are seeing the contract launch for three Type 26s. The future is bright for the Royal Navy and I wish he would stop talking it down.

Mr Speaker: There is no doubting the comprehensiveness of the replies, but if we could make slightly more timely progress, that would be appreciated by Back Benchers.

Armed Forces Covenant

9. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the armed forces covenant.

[900301]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Government are committed to ensuring that service personnel, veterans and their families are not disadvantaged, and that special provision is made for those who have sacrificed the most. We will continue to use the £10 million annual covenant fund to build partnerships that support our military and wider society, including the recently launched veterans gateway, which was mentioned earlier.

Lucy Allan: Some councils are much more proactive than others in supporting the armed forces covenant and in marking Armed Forces Day. Telford's Labour-run council has more work to do in ensuring that warm words on a website translate into action. What does he suggest can be done to encourage increased participation in future?

Mr Ellwood: I am really upset to hear that Telford did not join the hundreds of local authorities across the country on 24 June to pay tribute to our armed forces. I was in Plymouth; as we have heard, the Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) was in Northern Ireland; the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) was in Woolwich; and the Secretary of State was with the Prime Minister in Liverpool. I am not sure whether the Leader of the Opposition was on that day. We are putting a package of measures together to be given to all hon. Members, so that they can talk to their local authorities and so that next year Telford's council will join others around the country in paying tribute to our armed forces.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The armed forces covenant is a covenant between those who serve on the frontline and the Government. Those serving on the frontline have over the past six years experienced a real-terms pay cut of about 10%, so does the Minister not agree that that bond of trust is wearing a little thin?

Mr Ellwood: The Secretary of State has already answered the question on the pay itself, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right in what she implies: we have to make sure that we look after our service personnel. We put them in danger and in harm's way, and we must look after them. Armed Forces Day is one opportunity for the nation to show its appreciation.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The armed forces covenant covers equal access to healthcare. While on the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I met many veterans and serving personnel who have issues relating to stigma and mental health. What more is being done about that?

Mr Ellwood: I am pleased to be launching the new mental health strategy at the end of the month. We are bringing together the “Five Eyes”—New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom—to share best practice on how best to look after our armed forces when they move, retire and become veterans.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I am a proud patron of the veterans charity Forward Assist. Back in March, it was promised just under £200,000 from the tampon tax fund to help its work with female veterans, but the money has yet to materialise. Will the Minister say why there has been a delay and when the money will be released?

Mr Ellwood: I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I am not armed with that information, but I would be more than delighted to meet her to discuss the matter. I pay tribute to her for the work she does to support that important charity.

Armed Forces: Life Satisfaction

10. **Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to improve service life satisfaction rates in the Armed Forces. [900302]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The experience and morale of service personnel are central to defence. Both the Department and the new single services place the management of this as a high priority. As such, we have put in place a large number of programmes, namely the flexible engagement system—a Bill on which will come to the House shortly—the future accommodation model, the new joiners offer and the armed forces family strategy.

Jenny Chapman: Currently, forces families are given special assistance by local authorities when they leave the Army. Is the Minister aware that, upon divorce or separation, an Army spouse is instantly no longer classed as part of an Army family and receives no such support? Will he look into this and consider amending the advice given to local authorities?

Mr Ellwood: I am certainly happy to look into that, and I am grateful that the hon. Lady has taken the matter up. It is important that we get the package of measures right so that we can support our armed forces personnel and their families as they transition through their career.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): A key part of improving service life satisfaction is ensuring that soldiers can get their children into a good school that understands military life. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Montgomery Infant School and Nursery and Montgomery Junior School, which are celebrating having served the military community in Colchester for 50 years?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. Those are two schools out of almost 500 around the country that are located near garrisons and that provide support for the children of armed forces personnel. It is important that that continues. The service pupil premium is important for making sure that we look after those pupils, particularly as they end up moving around because of their parents' careers.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Would service life satisfaction rates be improved by job security? On that basis, will the Minister assure the House that the Army will be no smaller at the end of this Parliament than it is now?

Mr Ellwood: That is absolutely the intention. The hon. Gentleman is right to look at the life satisfaction survey, which is one reason behind some of the initiatives that I have mentioned, including the various reviews that are taking place.

Defence Spending

11. **Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con):** What plans the Government have to increase the defence budget in this Parliament. [900303]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):

Our defence budget for 2017-18 is £36 billion, and we are committed to increasing it by at least half a per cent above inflation every year of this Parliament. In addition, we are committed to continuing to meet the NATO guideline to spend at least 2% of our GDP on defence until 2022. Those two commitments will ensure that our armed forces can help to keep Britain safe.

Michael Tomlinson: The United Kingdom leads the way, with the biggest defence budget in Europe, but what more can be done to encourage other nations to play their part and increase their spending to protect our collective security?

Sir Michael Fallon: Since the Wales summit in 2014, defence spending by our allies in Europe has been increasing. Three more countries now meet that 2% target and more than 20 are committed to meeting it by a particular date. We continue to press those allies that have not yet met or planned to meet the target to do so.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that his Department recently stated that the trained strength of our armed forces is down below 140,000. If we are to keep people in our armed services satisfied, can we go back to what they were proud of—the tradition of taking in a lot of trainees and being one of the best trainers in the world?

Sir Michael Fallon: We are one of the best trainers in the world, and our armed forces training is highly respected the world over. Other countries are constantly telling me that they want more places at Cranwell, Sandhurst and Dartmouth; they also want our armed forces to go out and train, as we are doing in Ukraine and Nigeria; and we have the largest apprenticeship programme in the country.

Dreadnought Submarines

12. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What progress is being made on implementing the Dreadnought submarine programme. [900304]

16. **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What progress there has been on the programme to build four Dreadnought submarines. [900308]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): Thanks to the vote a year ago, the Dreadnought programme to replace the four Vanguard-class nuclear-armed submarines is on schedule. Construction on Dreadnought, the first of her class, commenced as planned in October 2016 at the BAE Systems yard in Barrow-in-Furness.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Will the handover from Vanguard to Dreadnought be seamless?

Harriett Baldwin: Certainly if I and the 80% of people who took part in the vote a year ago have anything to do with it, it will be. I gently draw the House's attention to the fact that both the shadow Defence Secretary and the Leader of the Opposition voted in the opposite Lobby on that day.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) would be good enough to circulate to all parliamentary colleagues his textbook on succinct questions from which they would greatly benefit.

Mrs Latham: The Dreadnought submarine programme is important to my constituents, many of whom work at the Rolls-Royce Raynesway facility which is building the pressurised water reactors that will go into those submarines. Rolls-Royce has been investing very heavily in the new facility to meet the demands of this programme. When will the Government make a decision?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the fact that companies not just in Barrow-in-Furness but up and down this country are involved in carrying out highly skilled work in this incredibly elaborate programme. I had the pleasure of visiting Raynesway and her nearby constituency and I know how many people in Derby and in Derbyshire depend on that programme. I can assure her that we are making substantial investment in the site.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): We were looking forward to discussing this very issue with the Minister during the general election campaign. I do not know what happened to her; perhaps she can come up to see us next time. Will she put the Government's full support behind our campaign now to raise education standards in the Furness area where, for generations, school leavers have had below average English and maths results, which is simply not good enough if we are to remain on track for the Dreadnought programme?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is very kind to invite me for another visit to his constituency. I shall look forward to it. He rightly raises the important issue of the skills that we need as a country for these highly skilled and important jobs. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), will be very happy to meet him to discuss what we are doing as we ensure that we put in place that pipeline of skills.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the investment in the Dreadnought-class submarines, which will bring investment to Devonport dockyard in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that we also need to deal with the legacy of current and previous submarines and accelerate the slow pace of the submarine dismantling programme?

Harriett Baldwin: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who is the son of a submariner, on his arrival in this place. It is wonderful to have someone taking such a close interest in the matter. He will be aware that it is the subject of ongoing commercial negotiations. We will keep the House informed.

Defence Spending

13. **Paul Scully** (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): What estimate he has made of the level of defence spending required over the course of this Parliament. [900305]

18. **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What estimate he has made of the level of defence spending required over the course of this Parliament. [900311]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The Government have committed to meeting the NATO guideline to spend at least 2% of our GDP on defence until the end of this Parliament, and to increase spending by at least half a per cent ahead of inflation every year of this Parliament.

Paul Scully: Is it not the case that we only need a growing defence budget if we are committed to leading in NATO, investing in our armed forces and giving them the equipment they need and maintaining our nuclear deterrent? Is it also not the case that this party is the only one that is committed to all three?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is spot on. We are leading by example in NATO. We are the second biggest defence spender in the alliance—one of only six members spending 2%—and we are committed to investing £178 billion in equipment between 2016 and 2026. Our growing defence budget means more ships, more planes, more armoured vehicles and more cutting-edge equipment for our forces.

Jo Churchill: Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the Apache helicopter package worth £48 million to secure high-skilled jobs at Wattisham airfield in my constituency, and does he agree that that will help our armed forces to keep us safe, and that it is all due to a growing defence budget?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, I was very pleased to announce this £48 million contract earlier this year, which will support jobs in my hon. Friend's area and provide world-class Apache training for our personnel. The Apache is a vital part of the British Army's fighting force and this investment is only possible thanks to a rising defence budget.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The UK was a central part of the European forces in Bosnia, Althea, and in the Mediterranean, Atalanta. Does this mean that the Government will be committing to remain part of such European forces in the future, after we have left the European Union?

Sir Michael Fallon: That will become clearer after we leave, but we play an important part in Sophia, Althea and Atalanta not just because of our membership of the European Union but because it is in our national interest to help to deal with migration, to curb piracy off the horn of Africa and to help to stabilise the western Balkans.

Mr Speaker: On this question, I call John Howell.

15. [900307] **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): The millions spent on technical innovation on bases around the UK is crucial, particularly on my own base of RAF Benson, where CAE is a big contributor. Does the Secretary of State agree with that and what will he do to continue it?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, I do agree with that. That is why we have set aside a specific innovation fund to encourage more innovation in defence and to get more of our small and medium-sized businesses, of which I know there are a large number in and around my hon. Friend's constituency, to help us find these cutting-edge solutions.

Defence Suppliers: Innovation

14. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage innovation by defence suppliers. [900306]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): With an equipment plan worth £178 billion and a rising defence budget, there are great opportunities for innovative suppliers. The £800 million innovation fund will provide the Ministry of Defence with the freedom to pursue innovative solutions in an open, competitive process.

Nigel Mills: Will the Minister ensure that there is greater risk appetite in which projects are selected for funding to ensure that our armed forces have the best technology available to them?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this issue. It is one of the things that we weight when we consider awards through the innovation fund to ensure that the projects with the highest risks but the biggest potential pay-off are the ones that are invested in.

Topical Questions

T1. [900318] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): It is an honour to be reappointed as Defence Secretary. Our party has a proud record of supporting our armed forces and providing the budget to ensure that they have the capabilities they need. Since the election, our new carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, has sailed, Daesh has been defeated in Mosul with further RAF strikes in Syria and Iraq, and we have signed up Sweden and Finland to join our joint expeditionary force, demonstrating that Britain continues to step up in the world.

Derek Thomas: On that note, as the MP with RNAS Culdrose in my constituency, may I ask the Secretary of State for an update on airpower capability and training for the new Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier?

Sir Michael Fallon: The Queen Elizabeth is designed to operate the F-35B Lightning II aircraft. One hundred and twenty British pilots and aircrew are training on the first 10 of these aircraft in the United States ahead of their arrival in the UK next year. The carrier will also operate Royal Navy Merlin helicopters, specifically those based in my hon. Friend's constituency at Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We welcome the fact that Iraqi forces, backed by the coalition air strikes, have managed to retake Mosul, with only a small section

of the city still under Daesh control. This has been a challenging and complex operation, and we pay tribute to the personnel who have played a part in it, including our forces working on Operation Shader. We know that the battle against Daesh and its evil ideology is far from over, so will the Secretary of State update the House on what further support our armed forces will be providing as Iraq's ground troops advance westwards towards Tal Afar?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is good to be able to agree with the hon. Lady about something today, and I join her in paying tribute to our services—the RAF, which has carried out more than 1,400 strikes in just under three years; the Army, which has helped to train more than 50,000 Iraqi and peshmerga troops; and the Royal Navy, which has helped to guard the American and French carriers when they have been striking from the Gulf. The military campaign is not over with the fall of Mosul. There remain other towns—Tal Afar, Hawija, in Nineveh province—and there are remnants of Daesh coalescing around the Middle Euphrates river valley, so there is still more work to be done, but there are 4 million fewer people living under Daesh rule since this House gave us permission to engage in this campaign.

T2. [900319] **James Heappey (Wells) (Con):** Further to the Secretary of State's update on progress against Daesh, I know that he will be as concerned as I am that as we defeat Daesh militarily on the ground, its threat seems to be changing as it attacks in other ways in other places. Will he update the House on what his Department is doing to counter those emerging new threats?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right that the military campaign up the Tigris and along the Euphrates is just part of the strategy. We need to continue disrupting Daesh's online propaganda. We need to target its senior leadership and undermine its finances. The military campaign has to be combined, and seen as part of a broader coalition campaign to undermine this evil organisation and make sure that it never comes back.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Both the Defence and Foreign Secretaries seem to have suggested that UK forces may target others in Syria beyond the mandate that was given in this House in December 2015—namely, the Assad regime. Will the Secretary of State confirm that if he is to deviate from that mandate, it will only happen after a full debate and vote in this House?

Sir Michael Fallon: I can confirm that our target in Syria is Daesh. Our strikes are in and around Raqqa and other Daesh areas, including Deir ez-Zor, that Daesh continues to hold. It is not our aim to collaborate with either the regime or indeed its principal sponsor, Russia.

T7. [900324] **David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con):** The Royal Navy has rescued hundreds of migrants in the Mediterranean and taken them to Italy, but has the time now come to consider taking them to North Africa in order to remove the incentive for people to risk their lives and to prevent money being made by people traffickers?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mark Lancaster): As part of Operation Sophia, the Royal Navy and UK assets have saved more than 12,500 lives, destroyed more than 170 smuggling boats and apprehended 23 suspected smugglers. We are the only country in Europe that has provided at least one ship at all times. It is UK Government policy to tackle migration at its source, and we are pursuing a comprehensive response including training coastguards, providing sustainable alternatives to unmanaged migration and disrupting criminal gangs.

T3. [900320] **Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab):** Given the delays in procuring the full order for Type 26 and Type 31 frigates, and given that HMS Ocean is to be paid off because of acute staffing shortages, just how does the Minister envisage that the Royal Navy will be capable of discharging its duties of protecting the UK at home and abroad?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I would have hoped for a few more words of welcome for the announcement of the Type 26 frigates, which will be ready for the out-of-service dates and replacement dates of the existing Type 23s. As the hon. Lady knows, HMS Ocean was always due to come out of service next year, and other amphibious capability will obviously be available.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I know from my constituency casework that access to appropriate housing is often a big challenge for those leaving the armed forces. What steps are being taken to ensure that armed forces veterans are prioritised on waiting lists, and that the appropriate help and support is properly being provided?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): We have touched on the importance of the veterans gateway programme, which we hope will provide a connection between the charities and those seeking that help. I also reiterate the importance of local authorities, and encourage all hon. Members to ask their local authorities what more they can do to provide the support our veterans need.

T4. [900321] **Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** I declare an interest as a former serviceman who served in Afghanistan.

The Secretary of State will have seen the recent coverage in *The Sunday Times* relating to alleged incidents that took place in Afghanistan and the subsequent Royal Military Police inquiry. Will he tell the House who took the decision to shut down Operation Northmoor? Why was that decision taken, when was it taken and was the Prime Minister kept informed?

Mr Speaker: Well, it will have to be a brief answer or it may need to be in writing. There are a lot of other questions to cover.

Mark Lancaster: In answering, I have to declare the same interest, having served in Afghanistan.

Our armed forces are rightly held to the highest standards, and credible, serious allegations of criminal behaviour must be investigated. Op Northmoor has

discontinued more than 90% of the 675 allegations received because there was no evidence of criminal or disciplinary offence. To date, no case has been referred to the Service Prosecuting Authority, but investigations continue.

Mr Speaker: Single sentence questions are really what is required.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Earlier, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) referred to evidence that Lord Hague gave to the House of Lords EU External Affairs Sub-Committee about the European defence arrangements after Brexit. He said that the best proposal was a paper written by the former Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Has my right hon. Friend seen that paper or would he like to?

Sir Michael Fallon: I have not actually seen that paper yet, but I am very happy to procure a copy and read it. I made the position clear about common foreign and defence policy. We participate in those missions and operations at the moment, and we continue to press for a partnership with the European Union that encompasses economic and security co-operation.

T5. [900322] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Recently, I attended the Grimsby veterans breakfast, and I was told about the problems that former servicemen and women have in accessing local mental health services. What representations did the Defence Secretary make to the Health Secretary regarding the dropping of the promised new mental health Bill from the Queen's Speech?

Mr Ellwood: This goes into the new strategy that is being launched in a couple of weeks' time, and I would be delighted to learn more about what the hon. Lady learned at her meetings, but I can say that regular meetings take place between the Secretary of State and the Health Secretary.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): One of the major concerns of servicemen in Carterton, which surrounds Brize Norton in my constituency, is the quality of service housing. What steps is the Minister taking to provide high-quality housing for our service personnel?

Mr Ellwood: This relates to one of the key initiatives we are putting forward—the future accommodation model—and I would be delighted to write to my hon. Friend with more details.

T6. [900323] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): At least 603 civilians have been killed by coalition air strikes in Iraq and Syria since the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve, according to the coalition itself, but the UK has claimed responsibility for none of these incidents. Will the Secretary of State commit to greater scrutiny and transparency for civilian casualties caused by UK airstrikes in Iraq and Syria?

Sir Michael Fallon: Let me emphasise to the hon. Gentleman that we carry out an assessment after each of the RAF strikes. We investigate any allegation that civilians may have been caught up in these strikes. So

far, we have not seen any evidence that civilians have been killed by an RAF strike, but, obviously, every single allegation is carefully investigated.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I hope the point about a sentence has been captured by colleagues—preferably a short one without all sorts of subordinate clauses.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the Defence Secretary join me in welcoming the new Combined Cadet Force at the Newark Academy and the Magnus school in Newark, and agree to continue the roll-out of cadet forces in this Parliament, particularly in schools that have suffered from poor educational performance in the past?

Mr Ellwood: Yes and yes.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

T8. [900325] **Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): Given that the Royal British Legion set out in the armed forces covenant annual report of last year its concerns about the mental health needs of veterans not being met as they should be, does the Secretary of State agree that we need a comprehensive approach to veterans' mental health, not just in the weeks after they leave the service but throughout their lives?

Mr Ellwood: We are providing a comprehensive approach. There is work that takes place, first, with those who are serving, to provide that umbrella of support, and then as they make their transition and, indeed, become veterans. We will be launching the new strategy in two weeks, and I look forward to making announcements to the House.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the RAF will retain its existing surveillance capability—Sentinel—which proved so effective in Mali, and that the existing fleet will be maintained and continued?

Harriett Baldwin: I can confirm that. I had the pleasure of going to north Wales recently to extend the Sentinel contract to 2021.

T9. [900326] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Will the Minister reverse the decision to shut down Operation Northmoor, given the recent report in *The Sunday Times* on possible criminal behaviour by an SAS unit in Afghanistan?

Mark Lancaster: It would be absolutely wrong for there to be ministerial interference in that operation. I am quite confident that Op Northmoor is appropriately resourced, both through personnel and finances, and I can only refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a few moments ago.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Government consider reinstating ring-fenced funding for the BBC Monitoring Service, given that its absence is leading to the closure of Caversham Park and a considerable reduction in the service's defensive potential?

Mark Lancaster: I am more than happy to look at the matter for my right hon. Friend.

T10. [900327] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Given that the UK claims to support multilateral nuclear disarmament, will the Secretary of State tell the House why the UK boycotted the UN's nuclear ban treaty negotiations and how the UK Government will respond to the nuclear ban treaty? Can he understand the disappointment of so many of my constituents at the UK's boycott of these negotiations?

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady is in pursuit of an essay, but, sadly, time allows only for a short answer.

Sir Michael Fallon: Let me be very clear: we do not support this treaty. We do not think it should apply to the United Kingdom, and if it is voted on we will not accept it.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): What conversations has the Minister had with British steel producers to maximise the use of British steel in the new Type 26 frigates, and what percentage of the steel that will be used to build those frigates will be British steel?

Harriett Baldwin: Again, I am glad that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the news on the Type 26 frigates. He will be aware that we publish on gov.uk the full pipeline in terms of our steel requirements. We do encourage our prime contractors to see where they can use British steel, and I am sure that in due course he will be pleased to see progress.

G20

3.35 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the G20 in Hamburg.

At this summit we showed how a global Britain can play a key role in shaping international responses to some of the biggest challenges of our time. On terrorism, trade, climate change, international development, migration, modern slavery and women's economic empowerment, we made leading contributions on issues that critically affect our national interest but which can be addressed only by working together with our international partners.

First, on terrorism, as we have seen with the horrific attacks in Manchester and London, the nature of the threat we face is evolving, and our response must evolve to meet it. The UK is leading the way. At the G7, and subsequently through a detailed action plan with President Macron, I called for industry to take responsibility more to rapidly detect and report extremist content online—and industry has now announced the launch of a global forum to do just that. At this summit we set the agenda again, calling on our G20 partners to squeeze the lifeblood out of terrorist networks by making the global financial system an entirely hostile environment for terrorists—and we secured agreements on all our proposals.

We agreed to work together to ensure there are no safe spaces for terrorist financing by increasing capacity-building and raising standards worldwide, especially in terrorist finance hotspots. We agreed to bring industry and law enforcement together to develop new tools and technologies better to identify suspicious small flows of money being used to support low cost terrorist attacks, such as those we have seen in the UK. Just as Interior Ministers are following up on the online agenda we set at the G7, so Finance Ministers will follow through on these G20 commitments to cut off the funding that fuels the terrorist threat we face.

I also called for the G20 to come together better to manage the risk posed by foreign fighters as they disperse from the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, and we agreed we would work to improve international information-sharing on the movement of individuals known to have travelled to and from Daesh territory. By working together in these ways we can defeat this terrorist threat and ensure that our way of life will always prevail.

Turning to the global economy, we are seeing encouraging signs of recovery with the IMF forecasting that global GDP will rise by 3.5%. But many, both here in the UK and across the G20, are simply not sharing in the benefits of that growth. So we need to build a global economy that works for everyone by ensuring that trade is not just free but, crucially, fair for all. That means fair for all people here in the UK, which is why we are forging a modern industrial strategy that will help to bring the benefits of trade to every part of our country. It means fair terms of trade for the poorest countries, which is why we will protect their trade preferences as we leave the EU, and in time explore options to improve their trade access; and it means strengthening the international rules that make trade fair between countries. So at this summit I argued that we must reform the international trading system, especially the World Trade

Organisation given its central role, so that it keeps pace with developments in key sectors like digital and services, and so it is better able to resolve disputes.

Some countries are not playing by the rules. They are not behaving responsibly and are creating risks to the global trading system. Nowhere is this clearer than in relation to the dumping of steel on global markets. The urgent need to act to remove excess capacity was recognised last year at the G20, but not enough has been done since. If we are to avoid unilateral action by nations seeking to protect themselves from unfairly priced steel, we need immediate collective action, so we agreed that the global forum established last year needs to be more effective and the pace of its work must quicken. In order to ensure its work gets the necessary attention and there is senior accountability, I have pressed for relevant Ministers from around the world to meet in this forum. The UK will play a leading role in championing all those reforms so that all citizens can share in the benefits of global growth.

As we leave the European Union, we will negotiate a new, comprehensive, bold and ambitious free trade agreement with the EU, but we will also seize the exciting opportunities to strike deals with old friends and new partners. At this summit, I held a number of meetings with other world leaders, all of whom made clear their strong desire to forge ambitious new bilateral trading relationships with the UK after Brexit. This included America, Japan, China and India. This morning, I welcomed Australian Prime Minister Turnbull to Downing Street, where he also reiterated his desire for a bold new trading relationship. All those discussions are a clear and powerful vote of confidence in British goods, British services, the British economy and the British people, and I look forward to building on them in the months ahead.

On climate change, the UK reaffirmed our commitment to the Paris agreement, which is vital if we are to take responsibility for the world we pass on to our children and grandchildren. There is not a choice between decarbonisation and economic growth, as the UK's own experience shows. We have reduced our emissions by around 40% over the last 16 years but grown our GDP by almost two thirds. So I, and my counterparts at the G20, are dismayed at America's withdrawal from this agreement. I spoke personally to President Trump to encourage him to rejoin the Paris agreement, and I continue to hope that that is exactly what he will do.

On international development, we reaffirmed our commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on development assistance, and we set out plans for a new long-term approach to reduce Africa's reliance on aid. That includes focusing on supporting African aspirations for trade and growth, creating millions of new jobs and harnessing the power of capital markets to generate trillions of new investment. We welcomed Germany's new compact with Africa, which reflects those principles.

On migration, I expressed the UK's continued support for the scale of the challenge facing Italy, and agreed with Prime Minister Gentiloni that a UK expert delegation from the Home Office and the Department for International Development will travel out to Italy to see how we can help further. That is yet further evidence that, while we are leaving the European Union, as a global Britain we will continue to work closely with all our European partners.

[The Prime Minister]

The G20 also agreed to use the upcoming negotiations on the UN global compacts to seek the comprehensive approach that the UK has been arguing for. That includes ensuring that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach; improving the way we distinguish between refugees and economic migrants; and developing a better overall approach to managing economic migration. It also includes providing humanitarian and development assistance to refugees in their home region. At this summit, the UK committed £55 million to support the Government of Tanzania in managing their refugee and migrant populations and to support the further integration of new naturalised Burundian refugees.

Turning to modern slavery, it is hard to comprehend that in today's world innocent and vulnerable men, women and children are being enslaved, forced into hard labour, raped, beaten and passed from abuser to abuser for profit. We cannot and will not ignore this dark and barbaric trade in human beings that is simply horrifying in its inhumanity. That is why I put this issue on the G20 agenda at my first summit a year ago, and at this summit I pushed for a global and co-ordinated approach to the complex business supply chains that can feed the demand for forced labour and child labour.

Our ground-breaking UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires companies to examine all aspects of their businesses, including their supply chains, and to publish their results. I called on my G20 partners to follow Britain's lead. I welcomed Germany's proposed vision zero fund, to which the UK is contributing, as an important part of helping to ensure the health and safety of workers in these global supply chains.

Finally, we agreed to create better job opportunities for women, to remove the legal barriers and end the discrimination and gender-based violence that restrict opportunities both at home and abroad. As part of this, the UK is contributing to the women entrepreneurs finance initiative, launched by the World Bank, which will provide more than \$1 billion to support women in developing countries to start and grow businesses. This is not just morally right; it is economically essential. The UK will continue to play a leading role in driving forward women's economic empowerment across the world.

Of course, we did not agree on everything at the summit, in particular on climate change. But when we have such disagreements, it is all the more important that we come together in forums such as the G20 to try to resolve them. As a global Britain, we will continue to work at bridging differences between nations and forging global responses to issues that are fundamental to our prosperity and security, and to that of our allies around the world. That is what we did at the summit, and that is what the Government will continue to do. I commend this statement to the House.

3.45 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of this statement. I am really surprised that she had much to contribute at the G20, given that there was barely a mention of international policy in her party's election manifesto—or, indeed, of any policy, so much so that the Government are apparently now asking other parties for their policy

ideas. If the Prime Minister would like it, I am very happy to furnish her with a copy of our election manifesto, or better still an early election in order that the people of this country can decide.

Let us face it: the Government have run out of steam, at a pivotal moment for our country and the world. Amid the uncertainty of Brexit, conflict in the Gulf states, nuclear sabre-rattling over North Korea, refugees continuing to flee war and destruction, ongoing pandemics and cross-border terrorism, poverty, inequality and the impact of climate change are the core global challenges of our time. Just when we need strong government, we have weakness from this Government.

The US President attempts to pull the plug on the Paris climate change deal, and that gets only a belated informal mention in a brief meeting with him; there was no opportunity to sign a joint letter from European leaders at the time he made the announcement. The UK's trade deficit is growing, at a time when we are negotiating our exit from the European Union. The UK-backed Saudi war in Yemen continues to kill, displace and injure thousands, and there have been 300,000 cases of cholera—this is a man-made catastrophe. Worse, the Government continue to sell arms to Saudi Arabia, one of the most repressive and brutal regimes, which finances terrorism and is breaching humanitarian law. The Court may have ruled that the Government acted legally, but they are certainly not acting ethically.

We welcome the ceasefire agreed between the US and Russia in south-west Syria. It is good news. Did the Prime Minister play any role in those negotiations? Will she commit to working with them to expand the ceasefire to the rest of that poor, benighted country?

The US President's attempt to pull out of the Paris climate change deal is both reckless and very dangerous. The commitments made in Paris are a vital move to stop the world reaching the point of no return on climate change. Other G20 leaders have been unequivocal with the US President, but not our Prime Minister; apparently, she did not raise the issue in her bilateral meeting but later raised it informally. I do not quite know what that means, but perhaps the Prime Minister can tell us exactly what the nature of that meeting was. What a complete neglect of her duty both to our people and—equally importantly—to our planet.

We need a leader who is prepared to speak out and talk up values of international co-operation, human rights, social justice and respect for international law. The Prime Minister now needs to listen. Will she condemn attempts to undermine global co-operation on climate change? Will she take meaningful action against our country's role in global tax avoidance, which starves many developing countries of funding for sustainable growth and which is sucking investment out of our public services?

Will the Prime Minister offer European Union nationals in Britain the same rights as they have now? What proposals does she have, and what discussions has she had, on Britain's membership of Euratom? Will she halt the immoral arms sales to Saudi Arabia, as Germany has done, and back Germany's call to end the bombing in Yemen?

We have heard the Prime Minister talk about "safe spaces" for terrorist finance, so why have her Government sat on the report on foreign funding of extremism and

radicalisation in the UK? When will that report be released? What new regulations is the UK bringing forward for UK companies and banks as part of her new global accord on terrorist financing?

Keeping Britain global is one of our country's most urgent tasks, but the truth is this country needs a new approach to foreign policy and global co-operation. The Conservative Government, in hock to vested interests, simply cannot deliver. Responding to the grotesque levels of inequality within countries and between them is important to the security and sustainability of our world. In a joint report published in April, the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organisation recognised what they referred to as the

"long-lasting displacements as well as large earnings losses" of workers, and that the negative experience of globalisation has informed the public's rejection of the established political order. The Prime Minister talks of the dumping of steel on global markets, but why did her Government fail to take the action that other European nations took at the most acute time when our steel industry was suffering?

This Government are the architect of failed austerity policies, and now threaten to use Brexit to turn Britain into a low wage, deregulated tax haven on the shores of Europe—a narrow and hopeless vision of the potential of this country that would serve only an elite few, and one that would ruin industry, destroy innovation and hit people's living standards.

Finally, the US President said a US-UK trade deal will happen quickly. Can the Prime Minister give any detail or timetable or any of the terms of this agreement—on environmental protections, workers' rights, consumer rights, product safety or any of the issues that so concern so many people? The Prime Minister has lost her mandate at home, and now she is losing Britain her influence abroad.

The Prime Minister: On the issue of terrorist financing, I say to the right hon. Gentleman that it is in fact the United Kingdom that has not only been developing approaches within the UK, working with our financial sector, but is taking this internationally and, as I have said, has raised this at the G20 and has agreement from countries sitting around the G20 table that we are going to take this forward together. I think what was important was that we had a separate communiqué on counter-terrorism, which specifically identifies issues such as working with the financial sector to identify suspicious small flows of funding. This is what the UK has led on, it was the UK's proposal and it was in the communiqué of the G20.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about global tax avoidance. It is the UK that has led on the issues of global tax avoidance. Global tax avoidance is on the agenda of these international meetings only because my predecessor, the right hon. David Cameron, put it there. It is the UK that has been leading on that.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about trade deals. I am very happy to tell him that we are already working with the Americans on what a trade deal might look like. We already have a working group with the Australians, and we have a working group with India as well. We are out there. He says that what Britain needs is somebody

actually standing up and speaking about these things; what we need is somebody doing these things, and that is exactly what we are doing.

On the issue of climate change, this country has a proud record on climate change. We secured the first truly global, legally binding agreement on climate change in the Paris agreement. We are the third best country in the world for tackling climate change. We were at the leading edge in putting through our own legislation in relation to emissions, and this country will continue to lead on this issue.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to the question of the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. I welcome the High Court judgment today—my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will make a statement on this later this afternoon—but I think it shows that we in this country do indeed operate one of the most robust export control regimes in the world.

The right hon. Gentleman started off by talking about the issue of the Government's agenda. This Government have an ambitious agenda to change this country. There are many issues—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Ashworth, you are a cheeky and rather over-excitable whippersnapper. Calm yourself and, as I say, take some sort of soothing medicament. That is a repeated refrain of mine, but with good reason.

The Prime Minister: There are many issues on which, I would hope, we will be able to achieve consensus across this House: issues such as ensuring that our police and security agencies have the powers they need to deal with the terrorist threat we face; issues such as responding to the Matthew Taylor report, which I commissioned to ensure that, in the new gig economy, as we see the world of work changing, workers have their rights protected.

We talked about women's empowerment at the G20 summit. One issue that I have been concerned about recently is the fact that many female candidates during the general election found themselves in receipt of bullying and harassment. I would have hoped that, as has been said by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), every leader of a political party in this House would stand up and condemn such action. It is time that the Leader of the Opposition did so.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her many successes at a productive summit, particularly on the trade front. Will she confirm that Ministers are working not just on trade deals with those countries we do not have one with at the moment but will have when we are outside the EU, but on making sure that we transfer the EU ones to the UK on exit?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give that confirmation to my right hon. Friend. We are working on trade in three areas. Obviously, one area is looking ahead to the trade agreements we can have with those countries we do not currently have them with as a member of the European Union. The second is ensuring that, where there are trade agreements with the EU, we are able to roll those forward as we leave the EU.

[The Prime Minister]

The third area is working with countries such as India and Australia to discuss what changes we can make now, before we leave the European Union, to improve our trade relationship.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The G20 summit was an eye-opening event: the UK is now floundering around on the global stage, desperately trying to win friends. A disastrous and unpredictable alliance was formed with the American President on trade. Goodness knows what a trade deal with America now would mean for our public services, for food quality and for workers' rights. Indeed, talk about a UK-US trade deal was dealt a blow by the Prime Minister's own Justice Secretary, who just hours after the summit said:

"It wouldn't be enough on its own".

The Prime Minister must come to her senses. A United Kingdom outside the single market would be ruinous. Our EU friends and partners are moving on without us, this year alone finalising trade deals with Japan and Canada, while the UK readily turns in on itself. Today's Scottish Chambers of Commerce survey shows that 61% of Scottish businesses feel that the UK should remain in both the single market and the customs union. It is quite scandalous that the Prime Minister turns a blind eye to the economy in favour of her Eurosceptic colleagues' reckless rhetoric.

I welcome the progress made at the G20 summit. I especially pay tribute to the work of the German Chancellor, who hosted and delivered a challenging agenda on global issues. The communiqué is clear that we must redouble our efforts in delivering the Paris agreement, calling it "irreversible". I ask the Prime Minister to set out the next steps in delivering the Paris agreement outcomes in the UK.

The communiqué also delivers the G20 Africa Partnership to boost growth and jobs across Africa, including an initiative on rural employment that will create 1.1 million new jobs by 2022. Will the Prime Minister explain the UK's role in delivering the initiative and confirm whether that role will continue after the UK exits the EU?

The agreement to take further action to achieve gender equality is undoubtedly universally welcomed in this House. The conclusions also push the G20 to

"take immediate and effective measures to eliminate child labour by 2025, forced labour, human trafficking and all forms of modern slavery."

That is a promising step indeed.

However, the Prime Minister went to Hamburg with an opening core message: she wanted the G20 to tackle terrorism. In particular, she wanted the G20 to tackle terrorist financing—what staggering hypocrisy! The Prime Minister who is sitting on a report commissioned by her predecessor, denying us all the truth about terrorist financing in the UK, had the brass neck to call on the G20 to do more. What an absolute outrage. Will she publish the Home Office extremism analysis report on terror funding in the UK and will she set up a public inquiry into questions around the funding of extremism?

The Prime Minister rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) was not making a personal accusation against the Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]* Order. I know what I am doing in these matters.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman was not making a personal accusation of hypocrisy against the Prime Minister. I cannot believe that he would knowingly do so, because it is palpably disorderly, and he ought to be aware of that. If he is not aware of that, it is time that he was, but I think he ought to spring to his feet and clarify the position.

Ian Blackford: Indeed, I am happy to clarify. It is the hypocrisy—

Mr Speaker: On a point of explanation: my sense was that there was an element of an accusation. Withdraw.

Ian Blackford: I will withdraw the allegation against the Prime Minister. It is against the—

Mr Speaker: No. I do not want to hear anything further. The Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues. He asked about trade deals. As I said in my statement, we have indeed started discussions with a number of countries—yes, the United States, but also Japan, China and India—and I was able to speak to representatives of a number of other countries at the G20 about the possibility of future trade deals.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the compact with Africa. That is not a European Union initiative. It has been led by Chancellor Merkel under the G20, and, indeed, the United Kingdom is playing its role. The principles that underpin the compact are principles that we have been using in the assistance that we have already been giving in development aid to a variety of countries in Africa. We already have a compact with Ethiopia, which the United Kingdom has put forward and which will create 100,000 jobs, including jobs for refugees living in Ethiopia. So we have already shown a commitment to these issues by what we are actually doing.

The hon. Gentleman talked about terrorist financing. Of course we discussed ensuring that we look across the board at all aspects of the issue, which means that, as we look at the changing nature of terrorism, we look not just at large-scale financing but at the small sums that are harder to trace—harder to identify—but that could underpin attacks that take place. The communiqué clearly put a focus on that new initiative.

It is important to eradicate modern slavery, which the hon. Gentleman also talked about. That was in the G20 agenda because I put it there, because modern slavery is an issue that this Government take very seriously. We introduced the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the first piece of legislation of its kind in the world, and we are working with others to ensure that we eradicate modern slavery.

I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that his portrayal of the UK's position at the G20 was simply wrong, but then, he was not there and I was.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. If I am to accommodate the extensive interest of colleagues in this matter, there will be an imperative for great brevity—to be, I hope, spectacularly exemplified now by Anna Soubry.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): That is very kind of you, Mr Speaker, but I did not actually have a question. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: The answer is that the right hon. Lady—[Interruption.] Order. I did not imagine it in my sleep. The right hon. Lady was standing. If she ceased to do so, I was not conscious of the fact; but she has leapt to her feet with alacrity, and the House is in a state of eager anticipation and bated breath.

Anna Soubry: I always take the opportunity to say something. [Laughter.]

I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could help us with the Modern Slavery Act. As she rightly said, we have led the world with that legislation, and many of us are hugely proud of the work that she did when she was Home Secretary. Is she finding that, throughout the world, there is now a desire for other countries to follow where she and this country have led?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to be able to say to my right hon. Friend that that is indeed the case. We are seeing a much greater awareness of the issue throughout the world, and a much greater willingness on the part of Governments to look at it. Governments are looking at the human trafficking aspect across borders, but as we know here in the UK, it is also important to look at what happens in-country—what happens to the citizens of one's own country—and that is exactly what we are doing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am certain that the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) will be as brief as his surname.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

The G20 discussed energy security. The Prime Minister will no doubt be aware of growing anxiety on both sides of the House about her proposal to withdraw the UK from the Euratom treaty, despite concern about the implications for the movement of scientists, nuclear materials and life-saving radiotherapies. Can she explain what the UK nuclear industry will gain from such a policy?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be aware from his chairing of the Select Committee that membership of Euratom is inextricably linked with membership of the European Union. As was signalled in the Queen's Speech with reference to a future Bill on this issue, we want to ensure that we can maintain those relationships—that co-operation with Euratom which enables the exchange of scientists and material. Countries throughout the world that are not members of the EU

have that relationship with Euratom, but we need to put that Bill in place, and I look forward to the right hon. Gentleman's support for it.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that free trade will be one of the great Brexit dividends, and that it will provide cheaper food, clothing and footwear, to the greatest benefit of the poorest in our society?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is free trade that enables us to grow economies, increase prosperity and provide jobs, and there will be benefits from the trade agreements that we want to negotiate throughout the world. But we also need as a country to defend the concept of free trade because, sadly, it is under too much attack from protectionists around the world.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): When journalists and activists such as Anna Politkovskaya and Natalia Estemirova have been murdered in Putin's Russia, does the Prime Minister share my anger at the chilling sight of Presidents Trump and Putin joking about the inconvenience of a free press, and will she commit to raising the importance of the independence of the media to both leaders when she next meets them?

The Prime Minister: We defend a free press. We think a free press is an essential underpinning of our democracy here, and we want to defend a free press around the world. I can assure the hon. Lady that we do regularly raise this issue with the Russian President and at all levels in Russian authorities.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for all the extraordinary work she has done on the issue of human trafficking and slavery, and commend her for raising that matter at the G20. However, with the world on the move, there are, unfortunately, opportunities for more, rather than less, of that. What can we do between the G20s to ensure that other countries take the issue as seriously as the UK does? We have set the bar on this and we need to raise others to it.

The Prime Minister: That is absolutely right, and we are taking action across a number of areas. As I said, the specific area we focused on at the G20 was the business supply chains, but one of the key ways of ensuring we can act against human trafficking and modern slavery is through the co-operation of the law enforcement agencies in the UK with others around the world. That is exactly what we are encouraging and what is happening—and, I am pleased to say, with some success.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): A year ago, the then Financial Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), told the House that the Government supported a multilateral deal on public country-by-country reporting. He said that “if we have not made progress by this time next year on reaching a multilateral agreement, we will need to look carefully at the issue once again.”—[Official Report, 28 June 2016; Vol. 612, c. 160.]

A year on, may I ask the Prime Minister to confirm what progress has been made, and what discussions she

[Caroline Flint]

has had with G20 members to ensure that we can tackle corporate tax avoidance through open, public country-by-country reporting?

The Prime Minister: We regularly raise that issue, and we are disappointed at the lack of progress on it. We will continue to press on it, but of course if we are going to get that multilateral agreement, others have to agree to the concept as well. We will continue to press on the issue, however. It is on the agenda because the UK has been putting it there, and we will continue to do so.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): On the new love-fest with Members on the Opposition Benches, given the record of the Leader of the Opposition on the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, does the Prime Minister possess a very long spoon?

The Prime Minister: I can say to my right hon. Friend that as Home Secretary I welcomed the co-operation which I had from the Labour Benches—not from the right hon. Gentleman who is currently Leader of the Opposition, but from others on his Benches, who have seen the need to ensure that our agencies have appropriate powers to deal with the terrorist threat that we face—and I look forward to Labour MPs, and indeed others on the Opposition Benches in this House, supporting those counter-terrorism measures when we bring them forward.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The G20 communiqué includes important references to investment in global education, including the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait. The UK has a proud record of leading on global health. Will the Prime Minister join Argentina during its forthcoming G20 presidency to ensure that investment in global education is given the priority it deserves?

The Prime Minister: Indeed, this is not just about looking ahead to the agenda for the next G20 meeting. It is also about what the United Kingdom has been doing practically, through our international development budget. For example, a significant number of girls, in particular, around the world are now being educated as a result of our input. We think that the global education agenda is very important.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): As the Prime Minister said in her statement, we are leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe. May I welcome her announcement that we will continue to work with our European friends and allies to develop a better overall approach to managing economic migration?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Again, this is an issue that the UK has been leading on, and other countries are increasingly recognising the importance of what we have been saying about differentiating between refugees and economic migrants. We will continue to work on this not just in the G20 but in the United Nations work that started last year and will be progressing towards the end of this year on the compact for migration and refugees across the world.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): We know that US intelligence services leaked sensitive UK intelligence in the hours following the attack on the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester. This weekend, according to a tweet from President Trump, he and President Putin were discussing forming

“an impenetrable Cyber Security unit so that election hacking...will be guarded and safe”.

Can the Prime Minister guarantee that UK intelligence assets on cyber-warfare will not be compromised, or shared in any way as long as there is a risk of this sort of bizarre and dangerous alliance with the Russians?

The Prime Minister: We take the issue of intelligence sharing very seriously. It is important that we are able to share intelligence with our allies in the United States and with other allies around the world, but what matters is that we are able to do that on the basis of confidence that that intelligence will be treated appropriately. I can assure the hon. Lady that we take the whole issue of cyber-security extremely seriously. That is why we have set up the new National Cyber Security Centre. We recognise and understand the threat that Russia poses in that area.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): We heard positive words from the President of the United States at the G20 summit—and more this morning from the Prime Minister of Australia—on the opportunities for rapid and comprehensive trade deals between their countries and the UK. Does my right hon. Friend agree that new trade deals with old friends and new, which will be realisable only outside the customs union, will add to the prosperity of a new, global Britain?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have been very clear that we want to undertake, sign up to and activate new trade deals with old friends and new allies alike. That, of course, means not being part of the customs union, which would prevent us from doing so. It is important that we are able to negotiate a trade agreement with the EU and trade agreements around the rest of the world.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I press the Prime Minister on the issue of migration and displacement, which affects 65 million people worldwide? She will know that, since 1 January, 82,800 people have risked their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean, and that 2,000 have died. The G20 leaders run 84% of the economy of the world. Apart from the £55 million that is going to Tanzania, what other resources are being given to deal with this catastrophic problem?

The Prime Minister: The resources being given to this issue are significant and varied. From the United Kingdom's point of view, we have been doing work through our development aid budget, particularly in a number of countries in Africa. I referred earlier to the compact that we have with Ethiopia, which is providing jobs in that country for refugees and others. We see it as important to ensure that there are economic opportunities in the countries of origin where there is migration, so that people do not feel the need to make that dangerous journey. As I announced at the last EU Council meeting, we are giving extra funding—I think £75 million—to work with Libya and Italy to ensure that there are humane conditions so that people can be returned to countries in Africa. We have also increased the ability of

the Libyan coastguard to ensure that it can properly intercept those boats that could pose a risk to people's lives if they were to try to make it across the Mediterranean. This is multi-faceted, but the United Kingdom is involved in every aspect of it.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition has spent his entire life opposing trade deals with countries such as Mexico and India. The Prime Minister's success at the G20 meeting means that we can look both east and west when securing trade deals. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should recognise and be proud of the global confidence in British services, British goods and the British economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The fact that several leaders—not only those whom I have mentioned, but others as well—have expressed their interest in trade deals with the United Kingdom is a vote of confidence in the British people.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I would be really interested to know when the Prime Minister expects to sign trade deals with Australia and India, how much she expects those deals to be worth, and how much extra immigration she intends to accept as part of those deals.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady may know that there is a limit to what we can put in place while we are still a member of the European Union, but that does not mean that we cannot discuss what a future trade agreement might be or how we can improve trade relations now. We can do just that in certain areas that are not covered by EU competences, and those are the discussions that we are having.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Behind some of the rhetoric coming from the other side of the House, there actually seems to be a consensus that a UK-US free trade deal would be a good and necessary thing when we leave the European Union. Does the Prime Minister welcome, like me, the clear support of the American Administration, as expressed at the G20 meeting? The other important decision makers in this are those in the American Congress. Following her successful visit to Philadelphia with the Republican caucus, will she allow the excellent congressional relations office in our Washington embassy to help Members of Parliament make the case for a trade deal to our congressional colleagues?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the role that Congress will play, and he raises an interesting idea. I did have discussions with members of Congress when I was in Philadelphia, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has also been having discussions with members of Congress recently. We will consider my hon. Friend's proposal, but he is right that we will be working with Congress and the American Administration on this.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants help in building consensus for sensible policies. There are majorities in this House to stay in Euratom and in the European Medicines Agency, so why does she not do that?

The Prime Minister: As I referred to in answer to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), membership of Euratom is inextricably linked with membership of the European Union. As we leave the European Union, we will be leaving Euratom, but we will be looking to put in place a similar relationship with Euratom, just as other countries around the world that are not members of the EU have access to the movement of scientists and materials and to Euratom's standards. We recognise the importance of this matter, which is why a Bill on this subject was in the Queen's Speech.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): As my right hon. Friend is now open to ideas from a man who tried to remove her from office, I wonder whether she will be prepared to take an idea from a friend who stood on a platform of keeping her in office and who wants her to stay in office—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) should calm himself. I want to hear what the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has to say.

Sir Edward Leigh: How about this idea: we have warm words about helping Italy on migration, but as long as it is forced to take all the refugees, more and more will obviously come. Will my right hon. Friend work with our allies to try to establish safe havens in Libya, so that people can be returned safely? That is a Conservative idea, not a useless socialist one.

The Prime Minister: Not only is the concept of being able to return people to Libya a good one, but it is one that we are already working on. It is one of the issues that we will be discussing with the Italians and others in relation to the extra humanitarian aid that we are making available. We have also offered the Italians support and help with returns to Nigeria, because a significant number of those who reach Italy come from Nigeria, where the United Kingdom is already running arrangements to provide the sort of area in which people are able to stay.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): On Syria and the loss of civilian life, specifically as it relates to US operations against Daesh in Raqqa, it appears that the rules of engagement have changed. Has the Prime Minister, or any of her Ministers, raised that with the United States of America?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady may recognise, we have regular discussions with the Americans and others within the coalition about the action that is taking place. I think that the military action to drive Daesh out of Mosul has been very important and that the military action in Raqqa will be important, but of course, as a United Kingdom, we always want to ensure that such actions deal with those they are supposed to deal with—the terrorists—and do not affect civilians.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I add my welcome to the Prime Minister's statement, particularly in respect of the additional assistance being given to Italy to tackle migration. My right hon. Friend may not be aware that I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary

[Alberto Costa]

group on Greece. As she knows, Greece also has a huge burden to bear with the movement of migrants. Will she agree to consider whether the delegation being sent to Italy might also be sent, in due course, to Greece?

The Prime Minister: As it happens, we are mirroring in Italy something that we have already offered to Greece and that has been taken up by Greece. Of course, there is now a different situation in Greece because of the European Union's deal with Turkey. We have seen a significant reduction in the number of migrants trying to reach Greece, but people who came through those routes are now trying to go through Libya into Italy. We will certainly ensure that we give as much support as we can to Italy in this matter.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): In the Prime Minister's enthusiasm for a bilateral trade agreement with the United States, will she accept American insistence that we dilute food standards and agree to the establishment of investment protection mechanisms that override British courts?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is asking about arrangements in negotiations that have yet to take place. We have started discussions with the Americans, and we will of course be negotiating trade arrangements with them.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Many developing countries are keen to trade with G20 countries free from punitive tariffs and on a level playing field. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Britain can be a real leader in free trade and fair trade, once we leave the European Union, by setting our own tariffs on trade and striking our own trade deals?

The Prime Minister: This is very important. We will have the ability, once we are outside the European Union, to strike those trade deals with countries around the world. Underpinning my hon. Friend's question is the need for the United Kingdom to stand up and promote free and fair trade around the world. As I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), there is a temptation in some areas to move towards protectionism, and I think we should stand against that. We should show very clearly that it is free trade that brings prosperity and jobs, and that it not only helps economies such as ours but helps some of the world's poorest countries to develop.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Given the special relationship that the Prime Minister enjoys with President Trump, can she explain why she failed to influence him and prevent him from pulling out of the Paris climate agreement? Will she condemn that decision and refrain from rolling out the red carpet for him in the form of a state visit?

The Prime Minister: We—the United Kingdom and I—made our view on the Paris agreement very clear to the United States. The United States takes its own decisions, and this was a commitment that President Trump made during his election campaign. I have said to him on more than one occasion that I hope we can

encourage the United States to come back into the Paris agreement, which I think is important. We will continue to work to try to get them back in.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Given that the vast majority of Members of Parliament, including the Leader of the Opposition, stood on an election platform explicitly backing Brexit, is it not time that people stopped using these negotiations for either political or even personal advantage and united behind the Prime Minister, allowing her and her Ministers to get on with delivering a deal that works for the whole of Britain?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is very right: 80% of the votes at the general election were for parties that said they wanted to deliver on the Brexit decision taken by the British people in the referendum last year. That is what the Government are going to get on and do, and I hope others across the House will support us in doing it.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in her statement that, "women and children are being enslaved, forced into hard labour, raped, beaten and passed from abuser to abuser for profit." Does she agree that that is no more true than when it comes to the depravity of child prostitution in India? Did she raise that issue with Prime Minister Modi?

The Prime Minister: I have raised this issue—the question of modern slavery—previously with Prime Minister Modi, as the United Kingdom wants people around the world to address it. We are very clear that we want to see this issue being dealt with. That is one of the reasons why we have put into legislation the requirement for companies here in the UK, which will be manufacturing and will be sourcing products from around the world, to look at their supply chains and report on what they find in them and whether or not modern slavery is taking place within them.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that although we are leaving the European Union, there are still many matters on which we need to co-operate? I am thinking particularly of across the English channel in dealing with the migrant problems, of how we are going to manage international trade, of how we are going to work with Europe to tackle the evil of people trafficking and of co-operation to stop these multinationals from gaming our tax systems across the European continent.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that there is much on which we will continue to want to co-operate with countries within the European Union. Of course, the relationship we have with France and Belgium in particular in relation to our ports and the traffic of people across the channel is very important to us. We have been working increasingly with the French authorities and others, including the Greek authorities, in dealing with this issue of human trafficking and successfully ensuring that criminal gangs involved in it are not just identified, but investigated and prosecuted.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm whether she spoke to President Erdogan of Turkey at the G20 summit? If so,

did she ask him about the reasons why the Cyprus talks in Switzerland broke down again without resolution last week?

The Prime Minister: I did speak to President Erdogan about the Cyprus talks; I also spoke to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who of course had been present at them, about the reason why they broke down. It is a matter of not only great disappointment, but great sadness that they did not come to fruition; they were the closest we have come to finding a solution for the unification of Cyprus. As I say, it is a matter of sadness that that was not able to be achieved. The United Nations worked to achieve it and the United Kingdom played a strong role in trying to achieve it, but sadly it did not happen.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A quarter of G20 members are also members of the Commonwealth. I welcome my right hon. Friend's talking about preliminary discussions with Australia and India, but will she also let the House know what discussions have been had with other Commonwealth countries, such as New Zealand?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to let my hon. Friend know that we have indeed also been having discussions with New Zealand. This is an issue I think we can progress with a number of other members of the Commonwealth—not just New Zealand, but Canada.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What concrete steps will the Government take next to get climate change back in the discussion with the US Administration?

The Prime Minister: We raise this issue regularly with the US Administration, but, crucially, there was a very clear message from everybody sitting around the table at the G20 to the US Administration about the importance we all placed on the climate change agreement—on the Paris agreement—and on the US being a member of it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering is located at the economic beating heart of the nation, so a strong economy and new international trade deals post-Brexit are very important for all of us who live there. The Prime Minister has told the House that over the weekend she met the leaders of America, China, Japan and India to talk about new trade deals. May I say to her that that sounds to me like a very good start and a very good weekend's work?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that. May I also recognise the important role that Kettering plays in the economy of the country? When we see these new trade deals come into place, I am sure that his constituents and others across the country will benefit from them.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Prime Minister guarantee that Brexit will not weaken the fight against terrorism? Will we retain full membership of Europol and Eurojust?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, I have stood at this Dispatch Box in the past and defended our membership of Europol and a number of other

arrangements we have in the security field, such as SIS II—the Schengen information system—and various others. As we are in formal negotiations with the EU, such matters will of course be matters for those negotiations, but I am clear that we want to continue to retain our co-operation on matters relating to crime and counter-terrorism. Some of the arrangements with other European countries are outside the EU. We want to maintain that co-operation because it is important not only for us but for countries in the EU.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): What conversations did the Prime Minister have with her fellow leaders about the growing crisis on the Korean peninsula, and what does she see as the UK's role in that crisis? Might part of it be further restrictions on British banks, two of which recently had warrants issued against them for inadvertently trading with North Korean businesses?

The Prime Minister: I had several discussions with other leaders about what is happening on the Korean peninsula and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's activities—particularly with President Xi, because China's role is crucial. It is the country with the greatest leverage in relation to North Korea, and I have urged President Xi—as have others, I believe—to exercise that leverage. We want to see the denuclearisation of North Korea.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Prime Minister talks about boosting trade, but what discussions has she had with other leaders about our open skies agreement with the USA, which depends on our relationship with the European Union? There is of course considerable concern for the aviation industry and airports such as Stansted, which plan ahead by 12 to 18 months. Time is very short.

The Prime Minister: The open skies agreement was referenced in the bilateral I had with President Trump.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her comments over the weekend and today condemning President Trump's decision to abandon the Paris agreement. I encourage her to keep the UK in the global vanguard on climate change by publishing a clean-growth plan as quickly as possible, so that those who are more reluctant on the matter can see the enormous value of a green economy.

The Prime Minister: The UK's record on this issue is good. We can already point to the actions we have taken here in the UK, but we will of course be looking to do more in future—for example, on air quality. We can already show the action we have taken and the benefit it has had. As I said in my statement, there is no contradiction between decarbonisation and a growing economy.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is a bad trade deal with the United States better than no deal?

The Prime Minister: We will be working to negotiate a good trade deal with the United States.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Prime Minister will recall that the recently deceased Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership would have included grotesque

[*Kelvin Hopkins*]

provisions allowing private global corporations to prosecute legitimate democratic Governments. Will she reject any future trade deal that includes such provisions?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern raised when the TTIP arrangements were being discussed and negotiated. I assure the hon. Gentleman that as we look to negotiate a trade deal with the United States, we will want to negotiate a deal that is in the United Kingdom's best interests.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): For all the progress against Daesh, hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria remain under siege from the evil al-Assad Government. Will the Prime Minister look again at securing multilateral agreement to get aid into those besieged towns and cities?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue; we regularly discuss with our coalition partners and others the possibility of getting that aid in. As he will know, there have been some attempts to ensure that aid can get through to those besieged civilians, but they have not always—[*Interruption.*] He says, “Try again”; I have to say that we do regularly raise this issue. The best answer is to find a solution to the situation in Syria that leads to a stable Syria in which those civilians are no longer being besieged.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): In a summit of extraordinarily awkward moments that would rival an episode of “The Addams Family”, perhaps the most bizarre moment was when President Trump’s seat was taken by his daughter. The Prime Minister did not seem to bat an eyelid, presumably because she expects somebody else to take her seat soon. Who does she hope that will be—the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary or the Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: On Ivanka Trump taking President Trump’s seat, it followed a morning session in which we had launched the women entrepreneurs financing initiative, which was developed by Ivanka Trump and the World Bank, so the move was entirely reasonable.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is welcome that the Prime Minister raised the issue of the dumping of Chinese steel with President Xi, but, quite frankly, words are cheap; it is action that matters. Will she please tell the House what specific actions will be taken to ensure that China starts playing by the rules?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the action that we have taken here in the United Kingdom to support our steel industry. The last G20 took the decision that the Global Forum would be the basis on which work will be done internationally to look at this issue of excess capacity in steel. That has not worked as well as people had hoped when it was set up under the Chinese presidency, but it is exactly that that we want to see, along with a ministerial meeting to look at excess steel capacity later this year.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the NHS will be excluded from any trade deal with the United States?

The Prime Minister: I am conscious that that was an issue that was raised in relation to the TTIP deal. A concern that people had was that, somehow, that was about changing the NHS. We will not change the national health service. The TTIP deal was never going to impact on the NHS in the way that the Opposition suggested.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Not all G20 countries have made the same sort of progress that we have in this country in relation to racist and discriminatory language. Was that an issue that she discussed with the G20 leaders, and does she agree that, where it happens, organisations should take decisive and swift action?

The Prime Minister: I must say to the hon. Gentleman that it behoves us all to ensure that we use appropriate language at all times.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Dieter Kempf, president of the Federation of German Industries, stated that, following Brexit,

“it will be extraordinarily difficult to avert negative effects on British businesses in particular.”

Has the Prime Minister got any closer to carrying out an economic assessment of the UK leaving the single market?

The Prime Minister: What is very clear is that we want to negotiate a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union, which gives us access to the single market. Anybody who is looking at the economic impacts that take place as a result of leaving the single market should recognise that the most important single market to the nations within the United Kingdom is the United Kingdom.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Given the Prime Minister’s personal commitment to ending modern slavery and her desire for other countries to follow the UK’s lead, why does she think it takes her Home Office more than two years to investigate the case of a woman in my constituency who is a victim of rape, slavery and trafficking? What kind of example is she setting for the G20 there?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware of the individual case that the hon. Gentleman raises. He talks about an investigation of the case of rape. That is a matter not for the Home Office but for the police.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following the questions by my right hon. Friends the Members for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), the Prime Minister said that our membership of Euratom is inextricably linked with our membership of the European Union, and yet we have been members of Euratom for longer than we have been members of the European Union, so how can that be the case? Will the Government rethink our arrangements in terms of Euratom, which is so important both for our civil nuclear sector and for access to the best radiotherapy treatments?

The Prime Minister: The fact is that the treaty makes it clear that there is a link between membership of the European Union and membership of Euratom. Across this House, we are all agreed that we want to ensure that we can still maintain the arrangements and relationships

that currently exist under Euratom, but they will be on a different basis in future. There is no argument that we want to maintain those relationships.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and note her efforts to reform the World Trade Organisation rules in order that they keep up with the services and digital sectors, which are crucial to the British economy. Does she agree that any reform of the WTO rules will take longer than the time we have left before the UK crashes out of EU without a trade deal in 2019?

The Prime Minister: One point of my comments at the G20 was that we need to speed up how the WTO considers these issues. Looking at the trade rules around the digital economy is not being started from scratch; the WTO has been doing it for some time. We just need to ensure that we get on with it and get those rules set.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's indication that she wants to coax the United States back into the Paris agreement. Will she consider strengthening her negotiating hand by suggesting to President Trump that there will be no negotiations on a free trade deal until they come back into the agreement, or is securing a free trade deal with the United States more important than securing the future of the planet?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that we get a good trade deal with the United States, because that would be to the benefit of people here, providing prosperity, economic growth and jobs across the UK. We will continue to press on the climate change agreement as well, and, as I say, I am encouraging President Trump, as are others, to find a way back into the Paris agreement. I think that that is important for us all, but meanwhile we will continue to do our bit through the application of the Paris agreement.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) wanted to make a point of order—

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: No? Okay. I was going to say that if he wanted to do so, it would normally happen after the statements but, as it appertained to the previous statement, he could raise it now if he wished. He does not, so that is fine. Thank you.

Export Licensing: High Court Judgment

4.41 pm

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the High Court judgment on export licensing. We welcome the divisional court's judgment today dismissing the claim by the Campaign Against Arms Trade for a judicial review of decisions regarding exports to Saudi Arabia for possible use in the conflict in Yemen. We are grateful to the court for the careful and meticulous way in which the evidence from both sides has been considered in reaching this judgment.

The judgment recognises the rigorous and robust processes that we have in place across Government to ensure that UK defence exports are licensed consistently with the Government's consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. These criteria give effect to an EU common position setting out rules for assessing military exports. They were introduced in October 2000 and last updated in March 2014. The consolidated criteria, used to assess each export licence application, cover: our international obligations, including sanctions; human rights and international humanitarian law; armed conflicts; regional peace and security; national security and the security of our allies; terrorism; risk of diversion; and the technical and economic capacity of the recipient country.

The claim challenged decisions not to suspend extant licences for the sale or transfer of arms or military equipment and to continue to grant new licences for such transfers. The judgment states that these decisions were lawful and rational. It describes the Government's decision making about export licensing as "highly sophisticated, structured and multi-faceted".

We note the application to appeal and will continue to defend the decisions challenged. We remain confident that the UK operates one of the most robust export control regimes in the world.

The central issue in relation to defence exports to Saudi Arabia in the context of the conflict in Yemen is Criterion 2c of the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria—that is, that the Government will not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law. We have sufficient information to carry out proper risk-based assessments against Criterion 2c. The situation has been kept under close review and to date we have not refused licences on Criterion 2c grounds because we have assessed—based on all the information available to us, including information not publicly available—that the clear risk threshold has not been reached. The judgment says that, on the evidence, we were rationally entitled to conclude that this threshold has indeed not been reached.

The exercise undertaken to inform these assessments has, in the words of the judgment,

"all the hallmarks of a rigorous and robust, multi-layered process of analysis carried out by numerous expert Government and military personnel, upon which the Secretary of State could properly rely".

In addition to a considered analysis by the Ministry of Defence of allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law, there has been intensive engagement

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with the Saudis at the highest level, stressing the need to comply with international humanitarian law, to investigate all incidents of concern and ensure that lessons are learned. Through this engagement, and our long-standing relationship with the Saudis, the UK Government have developed a higher degree of insight into Saudi military processes and procedures adopted in Yemen than might be expected for a country that is not party to the conflict. We have also considered public commitments to comply with international humanitarian law made by the Saudis, and monitored and analysed developments on the ground.

Each of these strands takes into account a wide range of sources and analyses, including those of a sensitive nature to which other parties, such as non-governmental organisations and the UN, do not have access. Taken together, these strands of information and analysis, which are reviewed regularly by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in comprehensive reports to the Foreign Secretary, have enabled Ministers to take informed decisions about the overall Criterion 2c position and individual export licence applications. They provide a sound basis on which the Foreign Secretary is able to advise me, as the Secretary of State for International Trade, on these points.

That the assessment has been that the issue of military exports to Saudi Arabia is “finely balanced” is seen by the judgment as instructive and points to the

“anxious scrutiny...given to the matter and the essential rationality and rigour of the process in which the Secretary of State was engaged.”

As the judgment states, on the basis of this information and analysis, we were rationally entitled to conclude that Saudi Arabia has put processes in place to secure respect for compliance with international humanitarian law, and that Saudi Arabia has been, and remains, genuinely committed to compliance with international humanitarian law. The Saudis have engaged and continue to engage constructively with the UK on these matters.

We do not receive this court judgment as a signal to do anything other than to continue to take our export control responsibilities very seriously. Our policy is to assess licence applications on a case-by-case basis against the rigorous tests set out in the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. We will not grant a licence if to do so would be inconsistent with these criteria. We will continue to keep the situation in Yemen under close scrutiny and base our export licensing assessments on the most up-to-date information and analysis available. If we assess that the clear risk threshold under Criterion 2c of the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria has been reached, we will not hesitate to refuse export licences and suspend licences already in circulation. I commend this statement to the House.

4.47 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and early sight of it. I know that he and the whole House will agree that the war in Yemen is a humanitarian tragedy. Thousands of people, including women and children, have been its victims both directly and indirectly through the loss of life-saving infrastructures such as hospitals and water supplies. All of us should, and do, mourn that keenly.

The question for the High Court was whether the Secretary of State was entitled to conclude that there was no risk that British weapons might be used in the commission of serious violations of international humanitarian law. Since the bombing of Yemen began in March 2015, the UK has licensed more than £3.3 billion of arms to the Saudi regime, including: £2.2 billion of ML10 licences, dealing with aircraft, helicopters and drones; £1.1 billion of ML4 licences, dealing with grenades, bombs, missiles and countermeasures; and £430,000-worth of ML6 licences, dealing with armoured vehicles and tanks.

The Secretary of State knows that indiscriminate use of air strikes, the destruction of a country’s means of food production and the targeting of civilians are all classed as war crimes under international humanitarian law. Does he recall that a United Nations panel of experts reported in January 2016 that Saudi Arabian forces had engaged in “widespread and systematic” targeting of civilians? Does he recall that, on 21 July last year, the Government corrected their previous declarations that they had no evidence of any violations, and that the Foreign Secretary stated in September last year that the Government’s new position was that they had been unable to make an assessment and that the Saudi authorities were best placed to make such an assessment? Does he accept that the Foreign Secretary was wrong to franchise out our obligation in this way, and that we, not the Saudis, have the duty to assess whether there is a risk that British arms sold to the Saudis might be used in contravention of international humanitarian law?

Does the Secretary of State recall that evidence revealed in the High Court in February this year showed that the civil servant at the head of export control had provided advice to a previous Secretary of State recommending that the UK suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia “given the gaps in knowledge about Saudi operations”?

Can he explain to the House why that recommendation was overruled by the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who sits alongside him?

Does the Secretary of State agree that the Committees on Arms Export Controls should be set up in this Parliament without delay so that export licensing for arms sales can come under the necessary parliamentary scrutiny?

Does the Secretary of State agree that today’s judgment did not seek to rule on whether the Government were correct in concluding that there was no clear risk of a serious breach of international humanitarian law, but rather on whether, in so concluding, they had reached a decision that could be considered rational, given the procedures they had adopted and the evidence they had considered? Does he further accept that if those procedures themselves were defective, or the evidence the Government considered was insufficient, misleading or even simply not comprehensive, it follows that the decision, however rational within its own parameters, could be deeply flawed, and this country might be at grave risk of violating our obligations in international humanitarian law?

The Government relied on material they brought forward only in closed hearing. That evidence could not be seen or heard by the claimant—the Campaign Against

Arms Trade—or its lawyers, Leigh Day. As such, the court ruling that the Government's decision was a rational one, given the procedures and evidence they considered, was based on secret evidence, which it was impossible to challenge. Does the Secretary of State accept that the court judgment makes specific reference to the substantial body of evidence presented in open session, which in fact suggests that a clear risk does exist that British arms might be used in violation of international humanitarian law? Will he agree to make the evidence that was available only in closed session available to Members of this House on Privy Council terms or, indeed, to the Intelligence and Security Committee?

Does the Secretary of State agree that we would all wish this country not only to adopt the highest ethical standards and controls but to be seen to adopt them, and that it would be helpful if he could now give his assurance to the House that it is his considered view that not only were the Government rational in adopting the view they did, given the procedures they followed and the evidence they considered, but that there is, to his certain knowledge, no risk whatever that UK arms might be used by Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war in any way that might constitute a violation of our obligations in international humanitarian law?

Dr Fox: May I say, first, that I agree with the hon. Gentleman that Yemen is indeed a humanitarian disaster that is begging for a political solution, to enable us to carry out our diplomatic efforts and our humanitarian efforts? I doubt whether anyone in the House would disagree with that.

The hon. Gentleman was not quite accurate in terms of what the court case was about. There were three grounds of challenge in court: first, failure to ask the correct questions and to make sufficient inquiries; secondly, failure to apply the suspension mechanism; and, thirdly, irrationally concluding that there was no clear risk under Criterion 2c. All these grounds have been dismissed by the court.

The hon. Gentleman makes the point about targeting. As a former Defence Secretary, I say to him that the MOD has gone to the nth degree to improve the ability of the Saudis to target more effectively, including through training by UK personnel. That is one of the biggest advances we have helped the Saudis to make in this.

The hon. Gentleman says that the UN and the NGOs had set out their own reservations about what had happened, but as the judgment made clear, they did not have sight of all the information that the judges were able to look at. He said there were gaps in the Government's knowledge, but the court again made it clear that the Government had not only the ability to assess what the gaps in that knowledge might have been, but the appropriate means of redressing that. I remind him that the criteria we operate are part of the EU consolidated criteria—they are not UK Government unilateral criteria.

I take exception to the hon. Gentleman's final point. I simply do not accept that if we have closed sessions it somehow makes the judgment less valid. I do not accept that we cannot have closed sessions that protect our national security or the personnel involved in our national security. Our sources need to be protected. I listened to the argument he makes but I simply cannot bring myself to accept it.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At the end of his statement my right hon. Friend referred to steps that could be taken if it were found that Saudi Arabia were misusing the arms that we supply. Will he expand on that a bit? The issue has come up before in the Committees on Arms Export Controls. If we supplied a consignment of sophisticated weapons for use in one way and it was used differently, or abused in defiance of the laws of war, what could we do to rectify the situation?

Dr Fox: As my right hon. Friend knows from his experience, there are a number of criteria for refusals and revocations; if he has not seen the list, I will ensure that he is sent it. If we believed that we were not able to convince ourselves that we were operating entirely within the consolidated criteria, we could suspend extant licences and refuse new ones. As I made very clear, if we believed that we were not fully in line with the criteria, we would do so.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of the statement. I apologise for my hoarse voice—I think I shouted a bit too much in excitement at London Pride on Saturday.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other human rights campaign groups believe that UK and US weapons have been used against Yemeni civilians. As things stand, 10,000 civilians have been killed, 50,000 wounded and 3 million displaced. Today's judgment raises a number of questions. We pay tribute to Campaign Against Arms Trade, which has taken the Government to court and forced them to explain themselves. We acknowledge CAAT's plan to appeal this decision and wish it well, but the UK Government should be coming to this house with the facts at all times, not having to be dragged through the courts for the public to get a full explanation.

Does the Secretary of State accept that it cannot be beneficial if the public lose confidence in the Government over their relationship with a supposed ally—one that is in flagrant breach of international humanitarian law in Yemen? Let us not forget that Saudi Arabia, the UK's largest weapons client, has bought more than £3 billion-worth of British arms in the past two years. UK and EU arms sales rules state that export licences cannot be granted if there is a “clear risk” that the equipment could be used to break international humanitarian law.

The Secretary of State says that he takes this very seriously. He will know that our former colleagues Angus Robertson and Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh were strong advocates for the re-establishment of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, which the UK Government promised before the election would be reconvened. When will that happen, and when will the first meeting take place? Can he give us categorical assurances that the election does not mean that such an important Committee will be kicked into the long grass?

Dr Fox: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. As the judgment set out, the case focused on the airstrikes conducted by a coalition led by Saudi Arabia in support of the legitimate Government of Yemen against the Houthi rebellion. We need to put on record that that is the origin of the conflict. Of course the humanitarian issues in Yemen are deeply troubling to all of us; we have all seen the pictures. The United Kingdom, through our various agencies and Government Departments,

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has been fulfilling as much of our diplomatic and humanitarian actions as we can in the circumstances. This will only be brought to an end by a political settlement, not by a military settlement.

The hon. Lady talks about the “clear risk” test. The judgment could not have been clearer that the Government met the “clear risk” test of criterion 2c in the way they carried this out.

On the hon. Lady’s point about the Committees on Arms Export Controls, I have absolutely no objection to such a Committee being set up. In fact, I think it is beneficial to us to ensure at all times the highest reputation of our probity in these matters. I would have absolutely no objection whatsoever to such a Committee being in place.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the detail of the judgment makes clear what a great job his civil servants, and other civil servants and officials in both the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office, have done and the rigorous way in which they have gone about their responsibilities? The judgment states that the process was “highly sophisticated, structured” and “multi-faceted”. They deserve congratulations today.

Dr Fox: I do not think that the judgment could have been more unequivocal. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. We have been utterly vigorous in the process. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the MOD and the Department for International Trade have worked extremely closely. Our officials have done a wonderful job. I am not sure that they necessarily appreciated the number of letters between us to ensure that the process worked as tightly as it has, but I am sure that they will all feel totally vindicated by the judgment on the way in which they have carried out their duties on behalf of this country’s international reputation and law.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the judgment, which demonstrates the robustness of the Export Control Act 2002, which was introduced by a Labour Government. It also supports the hard-working defence workers in our industry. The judgment states that the coalition did not deliberately target civilians and that the Saudis have procedures to abide by the principles of international humanitarian law. In the light of that, may I urge the Secretary of State to make representations to the Saudis to publish the outcomes of their own inquiries into the alleged incidents?

Dr Fox: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As I have said, I think we have the most robust system in existence on defence exports. We have been very clear with the Saudis that they have to carry out investigations into incidents and make those investigations clear to the United Kingdom Government, and we had to be very clear that, if we were to license further defence exports, those lessons had been learned and that mechanisms had been put in place to ensure that they would not happen again.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Given that the High Court has today found that the Government have been meticulous in their export licensing

processes, will the Secretary of State inform the House how much this court case is going to cost the taxpayer in legal fees?

Dr Fox: I hesitate a little because there may well be an appeal and we may not yet be at the end of the legal process, but to date the case has cost UK taxpayers somewhat in excess of £600,000.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State and the Government may have won this legal skirmish, but they certainly have not won the moral case and there are still many unanswered questions about the relationship and the terrible situation in Yemen. He said that he was confident, but the court judgment makes it clear that he was anxious. In fact, he wrote to the Foreign Secretary:

“I am concerned that the issue...continues to be finely balanced... I ask that you commission a further detailed assessment...and send me updated advice”,

and

“that you seek advice from”

senior Government lawyers “before making your recommendation.”

Why was the International Trade Secretary anxious? Was it because of the civilian deaths, the use of cluster bombs or the attacks on humanitarian supplies in operations, including water and sanitation supplies that could have been so critical in preventing the cholera epidemic?

Dr Fox: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes a close interest in the matter, but I really would not describe today’s landmark case as a “skirmish”. I think that everyone in the House would be well advised to read the full judgment. It is my job to be anxious about these things. It is my job to give the nth degree of scrutiny, because lives are potentially lost if we make the wrong judgments. It is the judgment of myself, the Foreign Secretary and other senior Ministers that gives us such anxiety. Were we to be cavalier, the hon. Gentleman would be absolutely right to criticise us. When we take the nth degree of care about the judgments we make, as previous Governments have done, he ought to be very grateful that we are doing so in the country’s interest.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. The judgment comes from an independent judiciary and underscores the robustness of the assessment of export licence applications. He will be aware, I hope, that Saudi Arabia is going through self-authored and hugely welcome modernisation and change. Can he assure me that those changes within the kingdom will be taken into account when considering future export licence applications to our strong and reliable ally in the middle east?

Dr Fox: We take all information into account when coming to a judgment. We look across the information from the FCO, the MOD and my Department to see what is happening, and we put the whole picture together before we come to a judgment. We can hardly be accused of spending too little time or looking at too little evidence in coming to the right conclusion.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Of course we accept the judgment of the court, because we believe in the rule of law. However, how does this help the Yemeni people?

So far, 10,000 people have died, 14 million people have been displaced and 200,000 people are suffering from cholera. The Secretary of State is a former Foreign Minister and a former Defence Secretary. After the statement, will he go back to the Foreign Office and get everyone back around the negotiating table—please?

Dr Fox: The Government, through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, are leaving no stone unturned in their attempts to get the peace process driven forward. Many attempts have been made to do so, and it is in all our interests to stop this dreadful humanitarian disaster. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The parties need to understand that the solution cannot be a purely military one; it has to be political.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I, too, welcome today's landmark ruling on a very difficult case. There are tens of thousands of defence workers, many of them in my constituency, whose jobs depend on the deals that are done. Can the Secretary of State assure me that we will continue to work with the Saudis to ensure accurate targeting and robust terms of arms sales?

Dr Fox: Of course we will continue to work with the Saudis to get an improvement in the position, to make sure that any decisions we take are within the criteria. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a lot of jobs in this country depend on our defence industry. Were campaigns such as that of the CAAT to be successful, there would be a rapid proliferation of new defence companies trying to set up around the world, and there would actually be less control over proliferation, rather than more.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Parliamentary scrutiny of arms exports is crucial, so I welcome what the Secretary of State said in response to challenges on the Committees on Arms Export Controls. It is vital that those Committees are re-established soon. May I ask the Government to look again at the question of an independent UN-led investigation into all alleged violations of international humanitarian law, by both sides, in the Yemen conflict?

Dr Fox: We have never had any objection to an independent UN inquiry into that. Part of the trouble, however, as set out in the judgment, was the availability of evidence—especially in open session—to such an inquiry. When Members read the full judgment, they will see why there is such significance to it. I am entirely open-minded about any future UN inquiry.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How many licences have been refused?

Dr Fox: There are a number of different criteria, and they are assessed on a regular basis. There were 366 refusals or revocations in 2016. Eight different categories of refusals and revocations are set out. To be helpful, I will make a copy of those categories available in the Library, if it does not have one already.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the judgment does not affirm that there was no risk of IHL breaches in Yemen; that the judge acknowledged significant evidence

that suggested that there was, or is, a risk of such breaches; and that the UK Government remain very heavily dependent on the Saudis' guarantees that they are not targeting civilians?

Dr Fox: It is impossible to sell anything to anybody with no risk attached. That is why we have a clear risk test in the consolidated criteria. We are in close touch with the Saudis, to a degree that I have never known before with a country that is party to a military dispute, in seeing how they do their targeting and understanding their methods and information. We have been closely helping to instruct them in ways to minimise civilian casualties in future.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I have had the opportunity to travel to Saudi Arabia and visit the targeting centre in Riyadh, where targets in Yemen are allocated. Does the Secretary of State agree that as well as exporting hardware, we export a doctrine of responsible use, which, at the end of the day, saves lives?

Dr Fox: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that we export not just the doctrine, but the professional expertise and training that can help to give effect to that doctrine.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Médecins Sans Frontières is reporting today that Yemenis are afraid to go to and to stay in the cholera treatment centre in Abs, 50 km from the frontline, since it was bombed by Saudi Arabia last August, killing 19 people. The Joint Incidents Assessment Team declared this atrocity an “unintentional mistake”, as it did in relation to the facilities at Haydan and Razeh in Saada and Houban in Taiz, all of which were hit by Saudi bombs. How many hospitals protected by international humanitarian law will the Secretary of State allow to be hit by Saudi Arabia before he stops selling it bombs?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady talks as though there is only one party in this dispute in that part of the world. Unfortunately, that is not the case. As I say, we take the key risk criteria very seriously. I am afraid that making the sort of rather uninformed points she has made for propaganda purposes does not actually help the humanitarian situation.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that among our many security objectives and values, keeping faith with important allies and being a reliable security partner should be among the most important, so that our allies can see that we take such important decisions rigorously, with the due process that they deserve and under the rule of law?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Protection of our allies and working with our allies is extremely important, but it is also important that our allies themselves understand that we will rigorously apply the criteria that we have set out and on which we are parties to an international agreement. Getting the balance right between those things is exactly what the Government have sought and are set to achieve.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State please enlighten us about why he does not take more notice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's reports on countries of concern for human rights and repression?

Dr Fox: Perhaps we are talking about a different judgment, because this judgment makes it very clear that we did take very clear account of the advice given by the Foreign Office and, indeed, that we sought further advice from the Foreign Office when it was necessary to do so.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that closed sessions are absolutely standard in litigation of this nature, and that it is absolutely wrong to make such a point to seek to undermine a clear and impartial ruling of the High Court that has confirmed the rigorous and detailed scrutiny applied to sensitive arms export decisions?

Dr Fox: I have to say that I think there is a danger in making such an attack on the court system, not least because secret or classified evidence was open to challenge by the special advocates representing the claimants in this case.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Secretary of State will be aware of reports by the BBC and the Danish newspaper *Dagbladet Information* in relation to the sale of surveillance and decryption technology to Saudi Arabia by British companies via their Danish subsidiaries. This technology has been used to crush internal dissent, and it arguably contravenes Criterion 5 restrictions due to the potential impact on UK security. Will the British Government review the legislation and oversight procedures governing sales of surveillance and decryption technology?

Dr Fox: If any individual or organisation has evidence that they believe quite clearly illustrates wrongdoing, they should bring it to the attention of the Government in detail.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Today's judgment clearly shows that the UK is very robust in its licensing criteria, but in the light of this decision will the Secretary of State reassure the House that under this system decisions to grant such licences are undertaken and assessed in line with international humanitarian law?

Dr Fox: The judgment makes it very clear that that is the case. I think that those who criticise the UK system should look at how robust we are in comparison with other countries. It would do everybody in this country good to recognise how robust and clear we are in the decisions that we make and how transparent we are in our conduct.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State rightly draws attention to the robust nature of the wording in the document produced by the court. This judgment relates to a decision under the EU consolidated criteria. Does he agree that it will be extremely important that we continue to maintain controls of arms exports that are at least as strong in future as they are under the existing EU consolidated criteria?

Dr Fox: It is slightly worrying to me how often I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I find myself doing so again today. It is not what the criteria are called, but what they contain that matters. Their content has clearly

stood the rigour of the Court's scrutiny today. I completely agree with him that it would be wayward, to say the least, for any Government to consider criteria any less rigorous than those we have today.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) does not look worried at all; he looks in a state of high contentment that the Secretary of State agrees with him. Anybody would think, as far as the hon. Gentleman was concerned, that Christmas had come early, but I suppose it is always rather good when people agree with one.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please tell the House whether, in his view, the High Court had before it all the information it needed to reach the judgment that has been handed down today?

Dr Fox: That was very much the view of the Court.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I ask the Secretary of State, as he continues to promote the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, what regard his Government have to the fact that 157 people were executed there last year, including minors, and that four young men who were arrested as minors, Dawoud al-Marhoon, Abdullah al-Zaher, Ali al-Nimr and Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, remain at imminent risk of execution by crucifixion?

Dr Fox: By our engagement with Saudi Arabia, we are able to raise any reservations we have about international humanitarian law and human rights, which we do.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): In the last Parliament, it took quite some time for the Committees on Arms Export Controls to be set up. Will my right hon. Friend speak to the Leader of the House to see whether that important Committee can be set up as quickly as possible?

Dr Fox: The usual channels will have heard my hon. Friend's view. As I have made clear, I have no objection to such a Committee being in place. It is a balanced judgment as to whether we have such a Committee or not. As I said, any Committee that looks into the probity of Ministers' decisions should be welcomed by Ministers as well as by the House as a whole.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In 2013, the Government launched their action plan on business and human rights with great fanfare, but subsequent questions by me and others revealed that it appears to be little more than a piece of paper. It is certainly not an action plan. How does that supposed action plan inform our business relationship with Saudi Arabia, and how will it inform that relationship after this judgment?

Dr Fox: It will not be affected by the judgment because the judgment said that the Government had a rigorous, responsible and rational view of decisions on defence exports. I would have thought the House would be pleased that our systems are working so transparently and so well.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I visited Saudi Arabia as part of a cross-party delegation in April and have declared that in the register. It is right that our arms exports are subject to legal challenge, and everyone

agrees about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, but I was surprised to learn, as were other members of the delegation, that 65,000 shells and rockets have been fired from Yemen into Saudi Arabia; that there have been civilian deaths and injuries in Saudi Arabia; and that civilians have been evacuated and displaced, and hospitals damaged, all in Saudi Arabia. Would my right hon. Friend welcome more balanced coverage of this distressing conflict?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes the very important point that this is not a conflict that Saudi Arabia or the coalition sought. They have a legitimate right of self-defence and a legitimate right to acquire the means of conducting that self-defence. It is clear that this is a bloody and brutal conflict and, as I said earlier, it requires a proper political settlement. That requires us to continue with our humanitarian and diplomatic efforts. He is absolutely right that it would not do any harm to have a little more of an objective view, rather than the one-sided blast that we see rather too often in this House and elsewhere.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Today's judgment was unequivocal: where the Government have failed is in advancing the peace process in Yemen and, of course, that includes Saudi Arabia. When will the Government make progress on a peace settlement for that country?

Dr Fox: The Government are doing all they can to take that process forward. Would that it were so simple that we could unilaterally create a solution in that war-torn part of the world. We are doing what we can to help our allies reach that settlement and will continue to do so. It is a humanitarian disaster but, sadly, it is not unilaterally within our power to simply bring it to an end.

Points of Order

5.19 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think I will take the points of order now, because there is a slew of them, but the two hon. Gentlemen can wait. Point of order, Tracy Brabin.

Tracy Brabin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the most recent session of questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I raised the case of local employers misleading workers about their right to holiday pay. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), assured me that the Government

“have increased the powers open to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to enforce those rights.”—[*Official Report*, 27 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 458.]

However, I subsequently received a written answer from the same Minister stating:

“HM Revenue and Customs has no powers to sanction companies for withholding holiday pay.”

The Minister has given me two answers stating the complete opposite of each other, in the space of a few days. Clearly, one or other of those answers must be wrong, and, although I am relatively new to this place, I was given to understand that Ministers were under a particular obligation not to mislead the House, even if inadvertently. More important, this leaves us unable to say for certain what the Government are actually going to do about the problem that I raised. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on whether there is any way of bringing the Minister back to the House to tell us which of her answers is final?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, both for her point of order and for her characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. It was also exceptionally helpful of her to attach to her proposed point of order the text of those two answers. I must say to the hon. Lady and to the House that textual exegesis is of the essence in these matters.

I have pored over the two answers, and have sought to reflect on whether they might in some way be not incompatible with each other, but such a conclusion is beyond my limited intellectual capacities. It certainly appears that the two answers are irreconcilable: one must be correct, and therefore, by definition, the other must not be. Apart from anything else, it is quite difficult to see how one can increase powers open to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs if in fact they have no such powers at all. So the matter does, I think, require some clarification.

The hon. Lady has certainly made her concern clear. The content of answers is not a matter for the Chair, but her concern has been conveyed to the Minister, in the sense that representatives of the Treasury Bench will have heard it, and her point will be recorded in the *Official Report*. If the Minister considers that she has

[*Mr Speaker*]

unintentionally misled the House, I am sure that she will take steps to put the record straight. I advise the hon. Lady to watch this space, and see whether such an attempt at corrective action is made. If it is, she will be happy. If it is not, my advice to her would be to return to the matter through further questioning, or possibly, if necessary, in extremis, by recourse to the Chair.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the importance of parliamentary scrutiny of arms export controls, which has been evidenced by the recent exchanges and by the judgment today, do you believe that there is anything to prevent the Committees on Arms Export Controls, or indeed any other Committees, from examining these important matters? Would they be able to review and look at classified information that was relevant to these matters—provided that the necessary security clearances were obtained—in much the same way as the Intelligence and Security Committee?

Mr Speaker: Off the top of my head, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that the only thing I can imagine preventing that would be a governmental refusal to divulge the information, on the grounds that it was classified and that the relevant Department or agency did not think that such sight by the Committee was necessary or desirable. Otherwise, there is nothing to prevent it, and if such a Committee were to seek it, it might find that its search was successful—and I am sure that, if it had anything to do with the prodigious efforts of the hon. Gentleman, it would have a very good chance of being successful. I hope that that will do for now, because it is the best answer that I can offer.

Stephen Twigg: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the statement just now, there was strong cross-party support for the re-establishment of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. In the previous Parliament, that Committee ceased to meet because one of its component Select Committees, the Foreign Affairs Committee, voted to unilaterally leave it. May I ask you to use your good offices to ensure that what the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State and the Scottish National party spokesperson said during the statement is fulfilled and we re-establish the Committees on Arms Export Controls as soon as possible?

Mr Speaker: I certainly think it would be very desirable for Parliament and for the scrutiny of the Executive branch by Parliament for that Committee to be re-established sooner rather than later. The word of caution or caveat that I insert, which the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, is that, unless I am much mistaken, that Committee can be established only when what might be called the feeder or constituent Committees have themselves been established. That, of course, requires not merely the election of the Chairs of those Committees, which is due to take place on Wednesday of this week, but the election by the respective parties, by such methods as they have adopted, of their member contingents on those Committees.

I have not been given much encouragement to think that those Committees will be fully constituted by the time of the summer recess, although I must say to the hon. Gentleman that it would be perfectly possible fully

to constitute all of the Select Committees by the time of the summer recess if there were a proper will to do so. If it were the case that none of the constituent political parties was interested in getting its act together, that would reflect very badly on them, to be frank, because the issue is not the interest of the party, but the interest of Parliament. If it transpired that some parties were ready to elect their members to those Committees and other parties were not, that would look very bad for the parties that were not ready. They have a responsibility in this matter.

I do not wish to say this unkindly, but, whoever is in government, it is absolutely natural that the zeal and enthusiasm to establish the Select Committees which scrutinise the Executive branch are never as obvious within the Executive branch as they are within Parliament. However, as Speaker, I am concerned about Parliament—Parliament exercising its rights, and Parliament doing its duty—and I would rather hope that, to put it bluntly, instead of faffing around, we could get on with this matter.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In defence of the former Foreign Affairs Committee, it must be said that I think that the reason for its withdrawal from the Committees on Arms Export Controls was the unauthorised leaking of a draft report; so that was a more complex situation than was first suggested.

However, reverting to the question of getting the Committees up and running, given that I understand that the 1922 Committee, for example, has not held its elections and it would normally handle the election of ordinary members to the Select Committees, is there any way that the resources of the House might be involved in assisting this process to get under way more quickly in the absence of the election of members of the executive of the 1922 Committee to administer this?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I take note of his first point, with which I will not quibble; I do not want to enter into the dispute about what caused the ceasing to operate of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, but I simply note what he said.

On the right hon. Gentleman's second point, I note that he said that, so far as his party is concerned, the officers of the 1922 Committee normally handle the election of members. To put it bluntly, if memory serves me correctly, what the officers of the 1922 Committee usually do in respect of their party—perhaps something similar operates in other parties—is simply oversee the count. Whether the officers of the 1922 Committee have or have not been elected is not a matter for the Chair—that is a party matter—but, frankly, overseeing the count does not require Einsteinian qualities; it is a pretty prosaic task.

I do not think it would be right to say that the resources of the House could be made available in what is essentially the oversight of a matter undertaken by parties. However, it would seem to be perfectly feasible, if my colleagues, the Deputy Speakers, were so willing, that they and I could volunteer our services to oversee the count, if the House thought that that would be helpful. My basic point stands: do colleagues want these Committees to be set up sooner rather than later?

If they do not, that is a pity, but if they do, those of us who are of good will and can be relied upon to conduct the count perfectly fairly, would, I suspect, be very happy to offer our services. I could hardly be more explicit. We will leave it there for now. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg).

Mr Speaker: I call Diana Johnson to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Member has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

Contaminated Blood

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

5.30 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the need for the Government to establish an independent public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, which is the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. In his valedictory speech to this House on 25 April 2017, the then right hon. Member for Leigh outlined a dossier of extremely serious allegations amounting to criminal conduct on the part of individuals involved in the contaminated blood scandal. He said that, if the Government did not commit to a public inquiry

“by the time the House rises for the summer recess, I will refer my evidence to the police”.—[*Official Report*, 25 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1081.]

The then Under-Secretary of State for Health—the former Member for Oxford West and Abingdon—asked him to submit his dossier of evidence to the Health Secretary, which he did. She assured the House that the Secretary of State would give it “the highest priority”. However, we have heard nothing since then, and we now have further unanswered questions that underline the need for an emergency debate.

First, the *Daily Mail* set out evidence last week that officials knew, as early as 1980, that 50 people with haemophilia a year were being infected with hepatitis C. Nothing was done about this for five years. Secondly, it has been reported in *The Sunday Times* that, on Friday 7 July, the Westminster leaders of all six non-Government parties in the House of Commons—including the Democratic Unionist party—wrote a joint letter to the Prime Minister urging her to commit to a Hillsborough-style inquiry. Thirdly, the right hon. Andy Burnham yesterday reaffirmed his commitment to refer cases of alleged criminality to the police, and confirmed that he has an appointment with the police on 26 July.

We are now fast approaching the summer recess deadline, yet what little comment the Government have made has only added to the confusion and strengthened the case for an emergency debate. It would appear that the Secretary of State for Health has not considered the dossier, as was promised on 25 April. Last week, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House of Commons responded to questions about the scandal: one from me, the other from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). Neither of them addressed our direct questions about the need for a public inquiry. Indeed, both raised further confusion by referring to the financial support for those affected as “compensation”, contradicting the position taken by previous Ministers.

These recent developments have been extremely significant. The letter of 7 July raises the prospect that, if the matter of a public inquiry were put to a vote in the House, it would command the support of the majority of Members of Parliament. For all the reasons I have outlined, I believe that we now need an emergency debate. We need the Government to do the right thing and secure justice for those affected in this scandal, including justice for the 2,400 people who have already died.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application from the hon. Member, and I am satisfied that the matter raised by her is proper to be discussed under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Member the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member has obtained the leave of the House. I can inform the House that the debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 11 July, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Member's application. She may wish to liaise either with my office or with the Clerks as to the precise wording, but it was referenced in her initial application to me and it conveys the gravamen of the issue in terms that are unmistakable. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Member and to the House, which has about 24 hours' notice—perhaps a bit less than that—of the intended debate.

Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill

5.35 pm

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Everyone in the House knows the importance of being connected, whether through traditional means or, increasingly, through digital connections. Whether the issue is the next generation of broadband technology, better mobile phone coverage or preparing for the next generation of 5G, the Bill is all about improved connectivity. Whether we are talking about fixed networks in the ground or the next generation of mobile and wireless connectivity, what people care about is how well connected they are—good download and upload speeds, reliability, latency, and how quickly they get reconnected when there is a problem. It is a problem that we can all identify with, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I say what a great pleasure it is to see you in the Chair for the first time from the Dispatch Box, Dame Rosie?

Our task is to prepare for a world of considerably greater demand for digital connectivity. Just as Moore's law states that the cost of computing halves each year, Nielsen's law has seen the doubling of data demands every two years. World-class connectivity is important for people to function in the modern world, whether at work or at play. It will continue to transform our public services and bring efficiencies there, too, and it is important for all sectors in our economy. The challenge is always to stay a step ahead of need. We need the digital infrastructure that can support that, providing ubiquitous coverage so that no one is left out, and sufficient capacity to ensure that data can flow at volume and with speed and reliability to meet the demands of modern life.

All these connections rely on Britain laying more fibre-optic cable. Whether fibre all the way to the premise—to each home and business—or the fibre that underpins the mobile network, all modern connectivity runs off fibre. Around five years ago, the nation took a strategic decision to roll out high-speed broadband based largely on a part-fibre, part-copper network. Superfast broadband delivered in that way is today available to 93% of UK homes and businesses. We rank first among the big European states for superfast connections, and we are on track to reach 95% by the end of this year.

In mentioning that, may I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)? He did so much—he never lets me forget how much—to deliver the first-rate, high-quality superfast broadband connectivity to homes and businesses around the country that now allows us to say that 93% of people have access to, but do not necessarily take up, superfast broadband.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for being so quick to take an intervention. May I suggest that he is being a little Panglossian and positive in his approach? As constituency MPs, we receive quite a number of complaints, and yet the grin on his face suggests quite the opposite.

Matt Hancock: That was me talking about what we have done so far—just wait until I talk about what we need to do in the future. I strongly agree with the hon. Lady

that we need to do much more, which is what the bulk of my speech is all about. Indeed, it is what the Bill is all about. If she holds the view she espouses, I look forward to her marching through the Division Lobby later in support.

Precisely on the point raised by the hon. Lady, of course 7% of premises do not yet have access to superfast connections, so we are introducing the new broadband universal service obligation so that, by 2020, everyone has access to a minimum level of service. That will provide a vital safety net and ensure that nobody is left behind as the country takes these strides towards better connectivity.

Yet even this is not enough. Demand marches on. People's needs and expectations have risen further, and will continue to rise. Yes, we need to celebrate what we have done so far, but we must also deliver deeper connectivity, now and in the future, to support a competitive market and to ensure that we get this infrastructure in the ground. We must work now to deliver the next generation of technologies, 5G and fibre over the decades ahead. This Bill is part of a suite of actions we are taking to boost Britain's fibre. We will break down barriers to better broadband for business and get quicker connectivity for consumers.

First, in the Digital Economy Act 2017 we reformed the electronic communications code, which regulates agreements between people who provide sites and the digital communication operators. That new code will make it easier for electronic communications infrastructure to be deployed, maintained and upgraded. We are currently finalising the regulations needed to support the new code, which we plan to commence later this year when the work has been completed.

Secondly, with the separation of Openreach from BT we will see a more competitive market, with an Openreach that serves all customers well, rather than just focusing on BT. That decision has been largely welcomed by BT's competitors and is the result of intense negotiations between Ofcom and BT. It is the right outcome and will ensure that Openreach delivers not just for its customers but for the whole country.

Thirdly, we are supporting the fibre roll-out through a £400 million digital infrastructure investment fund to help competitors in the market to reach scale and to deliver. The fund will improve access to commercial finance for alternative developers for full fibre infrastructure, helping them to accelerate roll-out plans and compete with the larger players.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will that assist those areas, of which there seem to be a great number in my constituency, where one part of, say, a market town or a small village has had its box upgraded by BT but users who are a few yards further away from the box, requiring longer reaches of copper wire, cannot get a decent service?

Matt Hancock: It may well help, but the universal service obligation is the thing that will really help those people, because it means everybody will have a right to a high-speed broadband connection. Some of those connections will be delivered by the next-generation full fibre connectivity and some of them by the existing technology, but our whole package of measures to deliver better broadband and quicker connectivity will ensure that we reach those people who, frustratingly,

can be just a few yards further away from a box—or, indeed, who see the fibre go down in the road in front of their premises—but who do not have a connection.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Bill, which is essential for moving the country forward and making our businesses as strong as possible, but even in the centre of Taunton Deane and the county town of Taunton there are areas where people still cannot get fast broadband. Will the Minister tell them how quickly they might be able to take advantage of this new service?

Matt Hancock: The universal service obligation is in law to ensure that everybody can access the service by 2020, but that is an end date, a deadline. As I said earlier, we have now reached 93% of premises. Crucially, that is 93% of premises having access to broadband—they still have to take it up. In fact, everybody who takes up the service in a subsidised area puts more money into the pot so that we can give more people access to superfast broadband.

Just 42% of the country had superfast broadband in 2010, when my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage took up the reins of delivering it, but now 93% have access to it. We are on track to get to 95% at the end of the year, and then 100% of premises will have access to high-speed broadband by 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) can see, we are rolling that out. Crucially, that is delivering today's technology—it delivers the needs of an average household today—but we also need to make sure we are ahead of the curve on the next generation of technology.

The idea of the digital investment fund is that it supports the commercial finance of alternative developers so we get more players into the market, rather than just having BT and Virgin, the two big players. The Government's investment will be at least matched on the same terms by private sector investments so we expect it to capitalise more private investment and bring more than £1 billion of investment overall into full-fibre broadband, getting the really high speeds that some people need and want now, but many, many more will need and want in the future as these demands increase.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I want to refer back to the Minister's remarks on the universal service obligation, which of course he is right to hail as a revolution in provision. The USO will be subject to a cost cap, so I wonder whether he will tell us when our constituents are likely to know what that cap is going to be and therefore whether he will be burnishing his credentials as a hero of rural Britain or not.

Matt Hancock: I know when to take a compliment as a threat. The truth is that this all depends on the technology. It may cost an awful lot to dig a trench and get a piece of fibre all the way to some places a long way from the existing network. However, new technologies are coming on stream, especially fixed wireless technologies, where a signal is beamed from one place to another. As a last resort, there are satellite technologies, which are good but not as reliable, that mean everyone can get connected. The aim is to get decent broadband speeds to every premises that wants them, making sure that as much of that as is feasibly possible is covered by a fixed network, but using technologies to get to the hardest to reach.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for confirming that 100% of properties will have access to this by 2020, but will he confirm what speeds they will have access to? At the moment, there is a range of 2 megabits per second for the universal service and 24 megabits per second and more for the superfast service. What range of speeds is he talking about when he refers to 100%?

Matt Hancock: We have said 10 megabits per second as a minimum, and that is Ofcom's analysis of the needs of the average household today; this is about making sure there is a service everybody can use. As we ask people to pay their taxes, get their passports or do their rural payments service applications online, it is a perfectly reasonable request back to us in government that people should have a decent level of broadband. If people want the really tip-top level, they may have to pay more for it, and that is not unreasonable either. We are saying that there must be a decent level of high-speed broadband. At the moment, we have said 10 megabits per second as a minimum, but we have also said that that has to be reviewed in an upwards direction in due course.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I speak as someone whose constituency is one big roadworks, where a company called Gigaclear delivers fibre to premises, which is welcomed by people in even quite remote communities.

Will the Minister help us with concerns we might have about his discussions with the Valuation Office Agency, which, in my experience, seems not to understand the way the world is? At the click of a VOA bureaucrat's mouse, the finances of a local unitary authority such as West Berkshire Council can be radically altered in terms of how networks are business rated.

Matt Hancock: I can tell my right hon. Friend two things. The first is that we are committed to a business rates review to look at these sorts of things for fibre currently in the ground; I am sure the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who are here on the Bench, will have heard what he has said.

The second thing is that at the heart of this Bill is making sure that new fibre that goes into the ground will have no such rates at all for the next five years, which is why we are here legislating today; we are making sure that companies such as the one he mentioned can get on and deliver this fibre, digging it in the ground as efficiently and cheaply as is reasonably possible, and we reduce the tax on that.

The fourth reason why fibre is important is for implementing our 5G strategy, including exploring commercial options to improve mobile coverage on our roads and rail networks, because we want mobile phone coverage where people live, work and travel. We are working with Ofcom to make sure that UK regulations on spectrum and infrastructure are 5G ready. We are working across Government with the Department for Transport and the Department for Communities and Local Government to make sure that we get right the rules on putting the infrastructure in place. We are also supporting 5G pilots, the first of which we will roll out next year, making Britain a global leader in 5G. All 5G roll-out is supported by fibre—there cannot be a 5G mast without the fibre that connects it to the network.

Fifthly, our £200 million local full-fibre networks programme is about supporting local bodies to stimulate the market for fibre connectivity in their areas. Fibre cannot be delivered by some sort of entirely nationalised, top-down, taxpayer-funded system; it has to be done in collaboration with the private sector. The local full-fibre networks programme is being delivered in support of local bodies to encourage the market to provide more fibre connectivity. For example, public sector anchor tenancies will bring together public sector broadband demand in an area to create an anchor customer, thereby making sure that investors know there is enough revenue to reduce the risk of building a new network. Such networks will connect directly into public sector buildings such as schools and hospitals. At the same time, they will improve connectivity for those who work in our vital public services and bring fibre closer to more homes and businesses, allowing them to be connected, too. The first wave of projects will begin later in the year. This is a great example of the public and private sectors working together to improve connectivity for all.

Sixthly, our business broadband fibre connection vouchers are incredibly exciting for people like me who are frustrated at the poor quality of broadband being delivered to businesses. In the previous Parliament, we had a really effective voucher scheme for superfast broadband for businesses. The new vouchers will be trialled by the end of the year and will be for full-fibre connections for businesses. The scheme will be rolled out more widely in 2018 to help businesses to get the best fibre broadband, because we know that so many jobs and so much business growth depends on it.

The Bill takes a further step. Business rates are an important source of revenue for local services, but have long been cited as a barrier to investment by the telecoms sector. There has been consternation—as articulated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon)—at how the rates have been calculated. There was a perception of a disparity or lack of fairness between the rates paid by some operators, such as BT and Virgin Media, and smaller alternative networks such as CityFibre and Gigaclear. The rating methodology is of course a matter for the independent VOA, which has been working on this issue with the sector, but it is complex work and we do not have a moment to waste.

We recognise the urgent need to go the extra mile, so in last year's autumn statement my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a 100% rate relief for all new fibre networks for five years from April 2017, with any relief backdated to that date. We will fund and fuel a full-fibre future, and we have introduced this Bill early in the Parliament to bring forward the legislative changes required to make that happen. The Bill will introduce new rules into each provision for business rates to allow us to vary the rates bill for telecommunication infrastructure, which will be set so that no rates are paid on new fibre for five years from the April just gone.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Does the Minister think the five-year period for business rates relief will be sufficient to incentivise the market players to get on and roll out fibre broadband? Will he try to ensure that as they do that we get coverage throughout the country and they do not just start in the easy-to-reach areas first?

Matt Hancock: First, there is no doubt that the five-year business rates holiday shows that we are reducing the cost of getting fibre into the ground. Secondly, it is time limited, so my message to alternative providers, as well as the big players, is to get on with it and make use of the relief while it is available. Thirdly, it gives us time for the business rates review and the VOA to look at the complexities over a reasonable period and come forward with a long-term, sustainable scheme. Sixthly—fourthly? I cannot remember which point I was up to, but I am sure that *Hansard* will make this bit sound really eloquent. I have completely lost my train of thought!

The final thing I was going to say is that the five-year business rates holiday will also give us the opportunity to decide, towards its end, whether five years has been long enough and whether we want to extend it. The fact that it is a five-year period demonstrates that providers should get on with it. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) that it will be no shorter than five years, and I am grateful for her intervention because it allowed me to get completely confused with my own points.

In total, our efforts are part of measures worth £1.1 billion to support the market-led roll-out of fibre broadband and ensure that we are at the front of the 5G queue. There is still a lot more work to be done, and we will consult shortly on the technical details of implementation. The relief will reduce the costs of deployment, thereby incentivising the market to deliver where it otherwise would not have. I hope that, in the spirit of cross-party collaboration, the Bill will get the support of Government and Opposition Members, as it will benefit people right across the United Kingdom. We want to see a country in which people are better connected and everyone can get online and reach their full potential, and to make sure that nobody is left behind. The Bill provides a step on that journey, and I commend it to the House.

5.56 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker? It is a pleasure to see you in your rightful place. I wish to take this opportunity to welcome my shadow Communities and Local Government team: my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), who has today agreed to act as my PPS.

The Opposition cautiously welcome the Government's apparent commitment to provide financial relief for all new investment in full-fibre internet for five years. In the course of my speech, I shall set out why I say "cautiously". Until the intervention from the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the Minister had waxed lyrical for twenty minutes before coming to business rate relief, which is the subject of this very short Bill.

The Opposition welcome the opportunity finally to discuss a crucial piece of infrastructure policy—a policy that will have a huge impact on the potential investment opportunities for all our communities over the coming decades. It is rather ironic that we are talking about IT connections on a day when pretty much all the parliamentary internet connection is down. I have it on good assurance that the parliamentary information and communications technology officers are busily trying to reconnect MPs to the internet and their email accounts.

All Members will know that the policy in the Bill will affect every part of the country—north or south; England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; urban or rural—so we have to get this right. I am sure Members will feel that acutely today as we and our staff struggle with the collapse of internet connection across the Westminster estate which I just mentioned.

We were expecting a larger, more substantial Bill, not least considering the scope of investment and certainty needed not only for full-fibre infrastructure but on business rates more widely. However, it appears that the Government have been in permanent listening mode for quite some time now, which would explain their decision to acquiesce in the concerns of independent and large internet providers who at the end of last year faced an excessive fourfold increase in their rateable values.

The UK's main providers and the Broadband Commission have estimated that UK 5G infrastructure will outstrip the economic benefits of fibre broadband, which most of the country currently uses, by 2026, when it will be outdated. By 2026, therefore, the UK will reach a tipping point where the direct economic benefits of new 5G optical fibre internet will beat the conventional fibre broadband. Various estimates point to a boost to the UK economy of between £5 billion to £7 billion just six years from roll-out, with 5G broadband delivering economic growth almost twice as quickly as conventional fibre broadband used today. Much as with our railways and road links, the quicker the connection, the faster businesses will grow, particularly in an age when online sales, social media and direct online contact with buyers and sellers are becoming the norm.

A study by O2 has revealed that national 5G infrastructure will also add an extra £3 billion a year through secondary supply chain impacts, boosting overall UK productivity by a total of £10 billion, which, as I have already said, makes good, sound economic sense. With improved connectivity comes greater economic growth, more jobs and improved links between business hubs and individuals alike. Although today's Bill will be welcomed by larger providers in the sector as it will relieve some of the burden that they face from increased business rates—£60 million is on offer, which is a big giveaway to them—I worry that it will do not as much as it should for the independent providers, and it will not come close to mitigating the fourfold increase that all providers have faced. Perhaps the Minister can give us some assurances when he winds up the debate. Providers are not the only ones who need assurances; consumers do, too, and they need to know that those costs will not be passed on to them.

Additionally, I am slightly disappointed that this Bill contains only partial measures, instead of the more detailed and wide-ranging set of proposals that were outlined in the Local Government Finance Bill, of which these measures were originally a part. I mention that Bill, which had successfully passed through Committee, as it included proposals on local business rate retention for local authorities as well as the legislation for business rate relief for new full-fibre broadband, which we are now discussing today. However, those fuller measures seem to have disappeared since the general election.

Since that election, I have asked the Secretary of State on three separate occasions about the progress that has been made on delivering business rate retention for local authorities. Perhaps the Under-Secretary of

[Andrew Gwynne]

State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), has something to say on that. He can intervene on me now or respond in his closing remarks. I ask him again: what is happening to retention and why has business rate relief for new 5G connectivity now been separated into this smaller, separate Bill?

As I have said, I have written to the Secretary of State about this matter and I await his response, although I hope that, by this stage, the Department will do less listening and more acting on this issue of business rate retention. In the spirit of the cross-party co-operation that the Prime Minister is now asking for, and in respect of the exchange of ideas and genuine dialogue between the Opposition and the Government, I suggest that perhaps we can work together on a shared future for local government finance. The local government sector deserves more than a policy and a financial black hole with which it is currently faced with the exclusion of the Local Government Finance Bill from the Queen's Speech. At the same time, the Government are still announcing their intention to remove the revenue support grant. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that when he closes the debate.

The Secretary of State and I visited the LGA conference last week—admittedly we received slightly different receptions. I am sure that he was reminded again and again by representatives from councils of all political colours of the financial certainty that local authorities desperately need—specifically at a time when they have already absorbed budgets cuts of 40%. However, like me, they have received no updates and no certainty. While we are talking about an element of the business rate in this Bill, perhaps we can remind the Secretary of State that local authorities need to have that clarity and certainty for future financial planning. They need some idea from this Government of where the wider business rate policy is going.

I will repeat what I said during my speech to the Local Government Association: “The Secretary of State told local government that they faced a looming crisis in confidence. He's wrong. It is this Government who are facing a looming crisis in confidence.” The lack of clarity on business rates and the botched business rates revaluations have left thousands of businesses facing cliff-edge increases in their rates. In addition, the Government's support package and promises to review the revaluation process go nowhere near far enough.

It is clear that business rates are this Department's ticking time bomb, which threatens to destroy high streets and town centres across the country. Labour advocates introducing statutory annual revaluations to stop businesses facing periodic and unmanageable hikes, and guarantees a fair and transparent appeals process. We will reform business rates, scrap quarterly reporting and end the scourge of late payments, because it is Labour which is the party of business. [Interruption.] Members can heckle, but the facts speak clearly: this Government have let down business and they have let down local government.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman just remind us of the Labour party's policy on corporation tax rates?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. Labour would have increased corporation tax to pay for better public services, but our rates would still have been among the lowest in the G20. It is a question of priorities. We can put money where people want it—in a better NHS, in better local government and in better education—or we can have poorly funded public services and tax giveaways to those at the very top. For all its rhetoric about ending austerity, it seems quite clear that the Conservative party has not changed one iota. There was a further omission to this Bill—

Kit Malthouse: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the reductions in corporation tax in the past few years have resulted in a massive increase in the cash collected by the Treasury?

Andrew Gwynne: As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), it is a question of priorities. We can give tax cuts to big business, or we can invest in public services. The point is that we made a very clear choice—[Interruption.] We have differences of opinion on this. The hon. Gentleman feels that having the lowest corporation tax is a good thing, but I think that having a corporation tax that is among the lowest in the world with a better funded public—[Interruption.] It is not an anti-business rant. I am talking about being both pro-business and pro-public services. That is the choice, because our public services are on their knees. If this is the cross-party co-operation that the Prime Minister wants, I am afraid it will be a long time coming.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way, because we are talking about infrastructure.

Helen Whately rose—

Andrew Gwynne: No, I have given way once to the hon. Lady, I will not do so again.

There is a further omission in this Bill—the exclusion of any real and meaningful legislative commitments on growing rural broadband. I am worried that there appears to be absolutely no mention in the body of the Bill or the explanatory notes of growing and expanding the UK's superfast broadband in our rural areas, although the Minister touched on it and I think there is some consensus about its desirability.

Let me give a short anecdote. Last year, I was privileged to be in a delegation to Zambia for the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly. In the middle of Africa, in the middle of nowhere, on a visit to a health scheme near the Zambezi river, I received an almost-perfect 4G connection to my mobile phone. There are parts of my constituency where I do not get such a perfect 4G connection. We need to look at our internet connections, broadband connections and mobile telephone connections in this country so that we have the very best to support business, consumers and individuals.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, many families living in rural areas struggle to get anything close to fast broadband, let alone 5G, which is what we are discussing today. Many others struggle to get anything above 2 megabits per second, making most average use of

day-to-day internet functions incredibly frustrating. The impact on rural businesses is steep, with the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs warning before the 2015 general election that rural communities are being overlooked for potential investment by businesses looking to expand and develop because certain regions have very poor digital connectivity. The then Chair of the Committee, the former Member for Thirsk and Malton, said:

“There is a risk in the current approach that improving service for those who already have it will leave even further behind those who have little or none.”

Rather than taking responsibility for this ever-growing chasm in our technology and identifying specific areas that desperately need investment, the Government have chosen to rely solely on the market to encourage improvements in any given area.

Matt Hancock: That is not the case. The Digital Economy Act 2017, which was the last Bill passed in the previous Parliament, gives us the power to require a universal service obligation so as to get high-speed broadband to everybody.

Andrew Gwynne: Well—*[Interruption.]* Exactly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton says, the Minister should share that with his Back Benchers. In all parts of the House, there is growing dissatisfaction with some rural broadband connectivity, its impact not just on consumers but on businesses, and the slow pace of improvement. It is clear that the Government ought perhaps to use their powers to ensure that those improvements happen, because it is a massive frustration for those communities and businesses—I see him nodding his head in agreement.

Matt Hancock: It is a serious frustration and we will use the powers.

Andrew Gwynne rose—

Helen Whately rose—

Andrew Gwynne: Will the hon. Lady let me answer the Minister’s intervention before I take another?

I am grateful to hear that from the Minister, and we will hold the Government to account to ensure that that intervention takes place. As he knows, we are all here to ensure that improvements happen, and if he has given a commitment from the Dispatch Box that he will use his ministerial position to ensure that the market is not a free-for-all and that the Government will ensure those improvements in rural areas, for rural businesses and consumers, the Opposition will support him.

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to one of the Back Benchers he mentions. Yes, many of us are campaigning on behalf of our constituents for better broadband, but on behalf of many of my constituents I appreciate that 20% of properties have been connected to superfast broadband thanks to the Government’s intervention. I expect up to 100% to be connected thanks to further Government intervention through the universal service obligation, as the Minister mentioned earlier. I look forward to being very grateful to the Government for all the work they are doing for my constituents.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention, because, of course, it was not just the Government who did that. I do not know whether she was a remainner or a leaver, but it would be remiss of the House, whatever our views on Brexit, not to acknowledge the involvement of the European Commission in funding some of the roll-out of this infrastructure and technology. It has come not just from the Government but from others, and we can see the European flag stickers on boxes, cabinets and infrastructure up and down the country.

Kit Malthouse rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I am afraid that I have upset the hon. Gentleman by mentioning the word “Europe”.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman has to recognise that there is also a downside to EU involvement. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) struggled for a long time with EU state aid rules and the roll-out of broadband and, certainly for small businesses, had to come up with a slightly Heath Robinson-esque scheme of vouchers to get around the rules. If anything, they hampered roll-out rather than assisting.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am not saying that everything was perfect with that scheme, or with the European Community and European Union. I was merely pointing out in response to the intervention from the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) that it would be remiss of us to suggest that all the funding came from central Government when it came from a variety of sources, including the European Commission, to which all those stickers are a testament.

As I have said and as the Minister has acknowledged, our rural areas need a long-term investment strategy, not just short-term subsidy, helpful though that is. I look forward to holding the Minister to account while he is in this post to ensure that he makes good on his word. The short-term subsidy will help, but we need to ensure that investment continues apace beyond the five-year deadline of this business rate relief and we need continually to update our internet connections with the latest technology.

The Opposition’s focus is to encourage investment in all communities by excluding new investment in plant and machinery from future business rates valuation, which will free up medium and large businesses to invest in any area of the country. The country needs fresh ideas to meet the emerging challenges of the new century, yet what we have seen today, in a stripped-down Bill, is the lack of a comprehensive and compelling legislative framework that supports all businesses and local authorities on business rates.

I desperately plead for the co-operation the Prime Minister has asked for. I hope that it is genuine and heartfelt, and that she looks for ideas from the Opposition, which we are more than happy to provide to the Government—ideas to improve our infrastructure in cities and in rural areas, to update our connectivity, not just physically but through the cloud and other technologies, and to use emerging technologies to benefit British business, which will be crucial if we are to keep a competitive advantage in the uncertain years ahead.

[Andrew Gwynne]

As we remove ourselves from the EU and strike a new set of trade deals across the world, we must keep that competitive edge. I agree with the Minister that new and emerging technology and infrastructure is part of the mechanism to drive Britain's economy in the face of the new challenges that lie ahead.

We will not divide the House tonight. We will look to strengthen the Bill in Committee and we will continue to challenge the Government on their wider local government finance policy until we get the answers and certainty that local government so desperately needs. Technology and infrastructure are vital to building Britain's capacity to grow and develop in a changing world in which we look to new and emerging markets. It is incumbent on whichever party is in government in future to work constructively with others to ensure that Britain's infrastructure is kept as up-to-date and as state-of-the-art as possible.

In that respect, we cautiously welcome the Bill. We will seek to strengthen it in Committee, but let us work together on some measures for future local government finance because, as the local government Minister knows, local government needs that certainty.

6.21 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to speak under your chairmanship for the second time, Madam Deputy Speaker. I refer hon. Members to my entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate. I thought it might be narrowly-focused, but I have judged, from the interventions on the Minister, that this is clearly going to be yet another talk-fest about the quality of broadband in individual Members' constituencies. That means I will have to stay for the whole debate to ensure that hon. Members are not too rude about me. I know that they are unwavering in their support of the Minister, but they always liked to have a go at me when I did his job.

It was quite good to hear the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), as he spent very little time actually talking about broadband, which shows how well the job has been done. He finessed his speech to talk widely about the important issue of business rates, but only mentioned broadband briefly. I understand why and respect his reasons because, under the stewardship of the Minister, we have of course seen the most successful rural broadband programme ever devised anywhere in the world. There was meant to be a cheer there. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I will give hon. Members their cue points as I go through my speech.

This incredibly successful programme has delivered superfast broadband to 4.5 million premises for a few hundred million pounds. Most of that money, if not all of it, will come back to the Government because the way in which the contracts were constructed means that the money starts to be paid back once take-up passes a certain threshold. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). She talked about the 20% of premises in her constituency that have superfast broadband. It is very important that we see our cup as half full. The Opposition Chief Whip

spends his time thinking his cup is half full at the moment—*[Interruption.]* Oh, he is the Deputy Chief Whip; well, for me, he is really the Chief Whip. I digress. We hear from people who do not have broadband and are waiting for superfast broadband, and it is absolutely understandable that they are irritated. Those voices obviously grow louder as superfast broadband spreads, and as more people have access to this fantastic technology.

I got involved in the debate about business rates for broadband many years ago. In fact, when I was in opposition, I used to tease the then telecoms Minister, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). I came up with an Opposition policy to reduce or eliminate business rates on telecoms infrastructure because every provider I went to told me that business rates were a big impediment to investment. I challenged the then Minister, asking him what on earth he was going to do about that, because the Valuation Office Agency was in charge of the business rates and it was the Minister's job to take the agency by the scruff of the neck and sort the situation out. Of course, when I got into office, I realised that there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. The Valuation Office Agency is independent. It decides the level of business rates and it certainly sees off any Minister who tries to alter its independence or affect its judgment—quite right too.

The other row we had was about the fact that BT apparently gets a better deal on its business rates compared with some of the smaller providers. My understanding is that that is because of a long-standing court case brought by BT. BT also has much more infrastructure in the ground, so it is able to cut a wholesale deal with the Valuation Office Agency, but it is much more difficult for small providers that are getting under way. It is one of those unfortunate things. The point that I am trying to make, in my own rambling fashion, is that the impact of business rates on investment in broadband infrastructure is real. It is one of the factors that people take into account when they are trying to build infrastructure. The Bill is a very welcome measure to address that problem.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know if you have actually read the Bill, but it is the most boring and technical Bill that I have ever read. There are only six clauses. I saw six officials sitting in the Box and wondered whether each had been given a clause, because the chance of making it to the end of drafting even one clause is almost impossible. I do not know whether any of my hon. Friends suffer from insomnia under the stress of doing this job. If so, I strongly recommend that they take the Bill home; they will be sound asleep by halfway through clause 1. However, I understand the thrust of the Bill, which aims to encourage new investment in broadband infrastructure by suspending the levying of business rates. That is the best way to do it, and the Government have calculated that something like £60 million of savings could be made.

I echo what the Minister said at the Dispatch Box. I hope that all new infrastructure providers—people have mentioned companies such as Gigaclear and CityFibre—will take advantage of this. The Bill is aimed squarely at them to remove a financial barrier to further investment. The Government are trying to move to the next phase of broadband roll-out. The key task of the previous Parliament was to get workable broadband with speeds of about 24 megabits to as many people as possible.

That has pretty much been completed. I understand that, under the universal service obligation, people in the last 5% of premises might get lower, but still workable, speeds. We are starting to build the future-proofed infrastructure to deliver fast and reliable broadband at speeds of above 30 megabits. Those are the kinds of broadband speeds that we will be able to dial up as more people make use of the technology. We all know—this does not need to be rehearsed—how much technology and data are now used, and the kind of bandwidth needed for the average home with two teenagers and parents watching 4K content, let alone for somewhere with business needs.

Planning is a much bigger impediment than business rates. A lot of people forget that. They think it is easy to build this infrastructure, but it is not at all. One comes across far too many cases of councils not being co-ordinated. There are cases of broadband providers having to go to five different council departments to get permission for way leaves, to dig up the highway and all the other permissions they need to build this infrastructure. We really need to get to grips with this in some shape or fashion.

In the spirit of co-operation that the Prime Minister announced this morning, let me suggest that the Labour Front Benchers talk to the Mayor of London. There must be an opportunity for him to set up a broadband taskforce to get all the London boroughs to co-ordinate their planning. I have heard of councils—it does not really matter what political colour they are—not granting way leaves to providers who wanted to provide broadband for social housing in London. I have heard of councils that did not want the green boxes on their pavements because they did not like the design. I have come across councils that refused to let broadband providers go ahead with future work, because they did not clear up after their previous work. Now, I understand councils' irritation, but they are still holding things back. It is an incredibly dull point, but there must be an opportunity to co-ordinate the planning functions of the London boroughs, as well as of councils across the country.

Michael Tomlinson: May I disagree vigorously with my right hon. Friend by saying that it is not a boring point? It is actually very important that these companies clear up after themselves, because it causes reputational damage when they try to deliver superfast broadband and leave a mess behind. That does cause concern to residents, and it has caused concern in my constituency. He may say that it is a bit of a dull point, but it is important for companies to get things right so that they can be encouraged to do more in future.

Mr Vaizey: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. In fact, although I welcome Virgin Media's investment in cable in Didcot, the company has irritated quite a few of my constituents on the Ladygrove estate, so he is right that companies should clear up after themselves. I suppose I did not make myself entirely clear; my point was that, while councils should hold companies to account, their retribution should not be, "You can't do any more work," because they would be punishing constituents for companies' past transgression.

Clearly, the Government want to encourage full fibre—fibre to the premises. It is true that we are falling behind some other countries. Spain, for example, is well advanced, but that is an historical advantage, because the infrastructure

was put in 30 years ago, with extraordinary foresight. One also has to remember the topography of the built environment, because the more apartment blocks—as opposed to spread-out domestic homes—there are, the easier it is to deliver broadband quickly.

One should also not necessarily be seduced by statistics. Members might see, for example, that France is ahead of us in terms of fibre to the premises, but that fibre is in the same place as fibre to the cabinet, so very few people take it up, and a lot of people would say that it is wasted investment. The incremental approach taken in the UK so far—of getting universal coverage for superfast broadband and then moving on to fibre to the premises—is the right approach, because it keeps pace with customer demand. That is what has to happen.

The good news about fibre to the premises is that the cost of investment is coming down rapidly. TalkTalk has conducted trials in York, and what has happened is telling. The company has got the cost of connecting each home down to a few hundred pounds—£200, £300 or £400, I think. Also, people now talk about the impact on the community—about whether their house is in the green zone, which is where the fibre to the premises is, and people want to be there. Interestingly, customers do not actually care whether they can access 1 gigabit; what they get by having fibre to the premises is an absolutely 100% reliable service, whereas even those of us who have signed up to superfast broadband know that the service can drop out.

This is a very important and welcome Bill. I would simply ask the Minister when he sums up—I do not know whether it will be the Secretary of State or my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital—to talk a little about whether the Government have considered how this relief impacts on mobile infrastructure. The roll-out of 4G in this country has been very successful, and we should not forget that it has all been done through private investment. When we rail against the mobile operators, we have to remember that they pay us—the taxpayers—by paying in to the Treasury coffers for spectrum, and they then build out their networks, effectively with their own capital. However, they come across the most bizarre planning issues all the time, and although the Minister talked about the electronic communications code, which will help to make mobile planning easier, we could perhaps hear about whether the Bill will apply to the fibre that goes from the masts back to the cabinets, or whether it could be amended so that mobile masts were free from whatever business rates these companies pay.

I would also like to hear how the Bill will encourage the roll-out of 5G, which will potentially transform everything. What we need are small cells dotted throughout the urban environment. The company Arqiva is already trialling a 5G network with its own spectrum. Again, we potentially need a rethink on planning to make it much easier for mobile companies to roll out these small cells. Given the dense coverage companies need, requiring them to get planning permission for these small cells will be a real hindrance to the fast roll-out of 5G.

As I made my remarks, I could tell that I had the full attention of the House. I noticed one or two yawns and a few slightly irritated looks as people thought, "When is this guy going to finish so that I can make my speech about our rotten broadband and get it in my brilliant local paper?" Well, the time is now, because I have finished.

6.35 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On behalf of my Plaid Cymru colleagues, may I congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on your election as a Deputy Speaker? We are looking forward to working with you and serving under your guidance for the duration of this Parliament.

I will keep my contribution short, because, to all intents and purposes from a Welsh perspective, this is an enabling Bill. We broadly welcome the provisions outlined in it, which provide powers for Welsh Ministers to award business rates relief to properties used to facilitate the transmission of broadband and mobile communications. This is at least one step in the right direction for my constituents, who have seen little digital dividend from the hundreds of millions of pounds spent on broadband and mobile signal to date.

I do, however, have some concerns about the UK Government's strategy of incentivising only the most advanced technology. As I understand the Bill, the plan in England is to provide 100% business rate relief for technology that supports 5G and ultrafast broadband. As we heard in an earlier intervention, that has a budget of around £60 million, which equates to Barnett consequentials for Wales of around £3 million, and that will just go into the general Welsh Government pot. If I have one message for today's debate, it is that it is vital that the Labour Welsh Government ring-fence that cash so that that money is not spent on pet projects.

Some 40% of my constituents are unable to access high-speed internet, and an even greater proportion are unable to get a 3G or 4G mobile phone signal in their homes. It is clear that we have a selective connectivity problem in Carmarthenshire. There is no doubt that that is holding back Carmarthenshire and the Welsh economy. We have no hope of making progress in developing our economy unless we can get to the bottom of the telecommunication infrastructure problems we face. If we were able to do so, I am confident that we would have a bright economic future in Carmarthenshire and in Wales, due to the incredible natural assets we have as a county and a country.

I am fortunate enough to have been born and raised in one of the most beautiful parts of the world, and I have no hesitation in saying that. We have a range of incredible leisure activities. One of the things that I think we will see in the modern workplace is that work and leisure time will become compressed, with people looking to set up their businesses where their leisure activities lie. Those who like horse riding, cycling, mountaineering, canoeing or surfing will find all those incredible leisure activities in abundance in Carmarthenshire, and I am confident that if we were able to deal with the basic telecommunication infrastructure problems we face, we would be able to put forward a very attractive economic package for investors and people looking to set up their businesses in our beautiful county.

While I urge the Welsh Government to use the powers and the Barnett consequentials awarded to them through the Bill to incentivise connectivity improvements in Wales, I call on Welsh Ministers to take an alternative approach to that put forward by the UK Government. It is vital that future investment, at a bare minimum, should enable rural Wales to reach a level playing field, before we start subsidising the most advanced technologies.

The connectivity inequality in our nation needs to be eradicated, not entrenched, but I am afraid that we have seen the Government and providers concentrating investment over recent years on easy hits—on the large cities and the large towns in my country—while the more rural areas have been deliberately left behind.

The Welsh Government, via this Bill, must now use these powers and consequentials wisely. Rather than only incentivising the most advanced telecommunications technology, it is time that something drastic was done to incentivise the building of telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas such as the communities that I am very fortunate to serve in Carmarthenshire.

6.40 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I suppose I should apologise to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) because the last time I was called to speak in a debate with no time limit, the subject was the local government finance settlement in 2016; I think that his scars have only just about healed. I was starting to take it a bit personally: every time I got called to speak, a new time limit was suddenly imposed, usually shorter than that which had gone before. My neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), has suggested that one is imposed pre-emptively on my getting up to speak, but I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you will resist his *cri de coeur*.

I am not going to talk with the authority of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), because he speaks with great experience about these matters, but I want to make some points. First, I very much welcome this Bill, particularly the fact that it appears to be the result of a collaboration between three important Government Departments—the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and the Treasury. That sort of joined-up working of three Departments coming together to identify a problem and create a solution is to be welcomed, and it signposts a very-likely-successful governmental modus operandi for the five years of a Conservative Government that we have ahead of us.

I find myself almost reaching for the smelling salts and some form of remedial medication in agreeing with the Labour Front Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), although I would probably approach this in a slightly different way. I welcome the proposals in the Bill to help speed up and underscore the importance of the delivery of broadband. In relation to local government, particularly in small shire districts that are always seeking to be more efficient, I hope—indeed, I know—that my hon. Friend the DCLG Minister will be taking the reduction in the funding stream of non-domestic rates to a local authority into consideration as he evolves the new funding settlement for our local councils, which do so much good work to deliver these services. I thought that the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish made that point well, and I am sure it will have been heard on both sides of the House. The delivery of broadband and the delivery of those local council services are important, very often, to exactly the same constituents who need both.

I hope that this Bill and the proposed financial incentive, if that is the correct word, will act as a spur to existing providers to deliver on the notspots that are very prevalent,

particularly, though not exclusively, in our rural areas, where the economic case for delivery is either non-existent or marginal, or where, as a result of further economic investigation, it has fallen outwith the confines and constraints of the initial contract usually agreed between a county council—in the case of Dorset, as with so many—and British Telecom.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage spoke with huge authority and experience, and I do not demur from anything that he said. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital talked about the evolving technologies that mean that this will not just be about wire, copper, fibre and so on, as fixed wireless and satellite are playing a part. This has been a long-running debate. I look to my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman)—he does not look to me, but I look to him—who has done so much to promote the delivery of rural broadband: so much, in fact, that he has been rewarded by being made a PPS in the Department, which means that he can no longer speak on the subject. This is clearly the route to promotion: talk with authority and knowledge on a subject and then get zipped up and silenced for many years to come. Perhaps that is why I got moved from DEFRA to the Home Office—I do not know.

This subject has knocked around in public and political debate and in the media for a long time, so it is worth while, with your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, pausing for a few moments to remind ourselves of the most enormous strides made in broadband provision for all our constituents and constituencies, urban and rural. Yesterday afternoon, I ordered something online—I am going to tease the House by not saying what the object was—to be delivered to my house tomorrow morning. The sketch writers, and indeed anybody else, may wish to run some sort of book on what it was. All I will say is that it is not something I would have guessed one could have ordered online even three or four years ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) is looking even more perplexed than usual. I was struck by the huge change that this technology has made, and this Bill helps to underpin its delivery.

From a rural point of view—and what could be more rural than North Dorset?—it is worth re-amplifying the benefits that are derived from fast and superfast broadband and that will be further helped by the contents of this Bill. It was a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards), who was right to point out, as I do, the huge unlocking of tourism potential in the promotion of hotel rooms, rooms in pubs, visitor attractions and the like, and in interactive tourist information centres in areas where local authorities may have withdrawn from face-to-face, over-the-counter visitor services. It will be absolutely crucial for the farmer in my constituency who is trying to buy or sell stock or make their submission to the Rural Payments Agency to have fast, reliable broadband of a speed and a regularity of service that no longer drops off just as they reach that crucial moment of hitting “send” or loading up that large map.

The issue is also crucial for small and medium-sized businesses. I am thinking of two in my constituency, both of which happen to be based in a small market town called Sturminster Newton: one is Crowdcomms and the other is Harts. Crowdcomms provides online and interactive platforms for large international conferences. It has offices based in Seattle, Sydney, and Sturminster Newton—it is there because the town has 4G.

Harts of Sturminster is one of those wonderful shops, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I know you will cherish and love as I do. It is the sort of shop that you walk into and do not say, “Do you sell?”, but merely ask, “Where can I find?”, because it sells absolutely everything, from powdered egg, to blackout curtains, to knicker elastic and sock gaiters—it is all there. You require none of those things, Madam Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.] My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage says that he now knows what I was ordering, but he would be wrong on all counts.

The shop makes its largest sales from its cookware department online. This is in a small market town that, until a few years ago, had as its main centre of industry the largest calf and livestock—particularly cattle—market in the whole of the south-west. Broadband is transforming local rural economies, creating good-quality, high-tech jobs. It also helps—we forget this at our peril—with the delivery of a whole raft of other things in rural social life, including for small villages that are geographically disconnected and not particularly well served by rural public transport.

We now have faster broadband service provision than has hitherto been the case, which helps with promoting charitable and fundraising events. I remember the frustration on my wife’s face as she tried to download posters for events she was organising for the St Gregory’s parents, teachers and friends association, but that has been transformed by the faster speed. Everybody in North Dorset now knows—as does everybody who reads the *Official Report*—that St Gregory’s summer sizzler event will take place in Marnhull this Friday. Everybody is invited. It is a huge fundraising event for our local school, the promotion of which is better enabled by broadband.

Mr Vaizey: I know more about my hon. Friend’s life now than I did five minutes ago. The entire House still wants him to reveal what he ordered online last week that he could not have ordered four years ago. That is a terrible omission from the tour of his domestic online arrangements.

Simon Hoare: I am going to tantalise the House still further by telling my right hon. Friend that it was inflatable and made of rubber. Before you rule me out of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will explain that it is a small, two-man dingy for my elder daughter and me to do a little bit of rowing and mackerel fishing during our summer holidays. Right hon. and hon. Friends may be pleased, disappointed, depressed or made despondent by that explanation.

Wendy Morton: I am reassured.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend says that she is relieved that it was something so entirely innocent and innocuous.

Fast broadband, which allows us to watch telly and order online, will of course help address rural isolation, which is particularly significant in an area such as mine. FaceTime and other mechanisms will help keep families together by keeping those intergenerational conversations going when geography means that a weekly visit may not always be appropriate, feasible or affordable.

Towns such as Sturminster are not unique. Glastonbury, which I think is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton),

[*Simon Hoare*]

has lost all of its banks—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry: Glastonbury is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey).

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions banks on the high street. Several branches in my constituency have shut and one of the arguments I hear is that people can use online banking, which is the very reason we need to ensure that we have excellent broadband facilities.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend makes my point far better than I could. She is absolutely right. The town of Sturminster has lost two banks in the past year and will lose its third bank at the end of this year. Private and business customers are told that internet banking is available. That is fine, so long as the speeds and the service are reliable enough to allow them to remember why they logged on and which financial transaction they wanted to undertake. That situation is not unique to my part of the world.

Wendy Morton: I did not use the word “relieved”; I said that I was reassured. Does my hon. Friend agree that rural areas such as Sturminster need a good broadband speed to enable people to access banking services that no longer exist on the high street? That will enable small businesses in particular, including those that are part of the gig economy, to operate in a business environment that does not leave them at a competitive disadvantage compared with those parts of the country that already have good broadband coverage.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Who among us has not visited an agricultural show or small business that cannot afford the necessary infrastructure for the interconnected pieces that allow people to pay by credit card or contactless? However, by plugging a whizzy device into an iPhone—my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage know all about this, but it baffles me—my credit card can be charged for whatever service I have purchased, thereby helping small and medium-sized businesses. That also helps particularly, though not exclusively, those people who make and sell things from home and do not have commercial premises from which to trade.

The Bill is helpful for all those reasons. It will also help the next generation. Television and other advertisements always focus on getting faster film, the latest cartoon, watching sport and so on, all of which is welcome and laudable. There is also, however, potential for huge learning opportunities for our young people through the delivery of education in a 21st-century setting. That will, I hope, boost and bolster our productivity, and it can all be assisted by superfast and reliable broadband.

Over the past seven years, the Government have made the most enormous strides. We have occasionally beaten up our Ministers and others, saying “I’ve got this village or that hamlet that isn’t covered.” As I said at the start of my speech, this issue is not reserved solely to the rural setting; it is also an issue on the edge of Tech City here in London and elsewhere. However, if we pause and look at the data, we will see that, notwithstanding

some of the problems we have had, we are striding ahead of many of our European friends, who are also our economic and commercial competitors, in providing access to broadband. We should not always beat ourselves up. At a time when we are all being fed the negative and “the anti”, this is something about which the Government should be duly proud, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage has said.

The Bill is a fundamental and very important next step. We hope and believe that it will assist better and faster delivery in our rural areas in North Dorset and across the county of Dorset. It has my full support. The Ministers promoting it have my admiration and encouragement, and I look forward to seeing it make speedy progress through this House.

6.57 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow my comrade and hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare).

On my first day in this House, I was told by an older Member that if I wanted to keep something secret I should make a speech about it in the House of Commons. And so it was that on 13 September last year I gave a speech on the subject of this Bill and called for 100% rate relief of new fibre networks. I even went so far as to draft an amendment to the Digital Economy Bill, not to give that rate relief but to require the valuation office to produce an annual report on the impact of the rating system on competition in the telecoms sector. Various players in the industry had presented me with the ridiculous conundrum that it was cheaper for them to rent fibre from BT than to pay the rates bill on putting in new fibre themselves. In their view, that entrenched the near monopoly of BT and gave it an enormous structural advantage, which was basically choking off competition.

I spoke on Second Reading of the Digital Economy Bill, drafted an amendment and had a fruitful conversation with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital, who is no longer in his place, who persuaded me that, given some of the other amendments I had tabled, I should leave my proposal to the Government to mull over for some months and that they would give it some serious thought. Imagine my pleasure and surprise, first when it appeared in last year’s autumn statement, and now, even more so, that it has appeared in this Bill. It will provide an enormous boost to competition in the sector. There is no doubt that the asymmetric deal on business rates between BT and new entrants is choking off new investment in large parts of the country. Smaller companies have very little incentive to compete directly with BT; they have to look for areas of the country that are currently unserved or un-commercial in order to try to make their networks pay. As a result, innovation is hard to come by.

BT has been helpful to me and my constituents, as I know it has been to several other Members, and I hope it will take the Bill in the spirit in which it is intended. Those of us who believe in a market economy think that competition is good. We think that it will be better not only for the consumer, but for BT, because it will drive the company to greater innovation, efficiency and, we hope, profit.

The Bill represents a welcome move towards seeing broadband and telecommunications as utilities. Over the past few months, steps have been taken in legislation towards that position. The building regulations have been changed to make the provision of broadband compulsory in new developments. Broadband will, I hope, be provided as a universal service over the next few years, and now non-domestic rates are being lifted on parts of the network. Broadband is increasingly being treated—as water, gas and electricity are—as a vital utility, which is what it is becoming. I am pleased about that development, and I hope that broadband will continue to be viewed increasingly as a utility.

In a constituency such as mine, broadband is incredibly important for a successful, vibrant countryside. If the countryside is to compete with its urban neighbours, it needs to be connected to the world. These days, that social and economic connection takes the form not of roads, dual carriageways or motorways, but of superfast broadband. My constituency, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), is peppered with enterprises that do most of their business online. Hon. Members will be pleased to know that on Saturday I attended the Ampthill fête and came across a brand new and very pleasing business called Test Valley Gin, a new brand of gin that is taking the market by storm. Kate Griffin, the inventor of this gin, is having some success. The 36 bottles she produces each week are selling like hot cakes, many of them online on a website called theginstall.co.uk.

Andrew Gwynne: My ears pricked up when the hon. Gentleman mentioned gin. Perhaps, in the interests of cross-party co-operation, he could share some around?

Kit Malthouse: I have to confess that I was so taken with the small sample that I tried—I was driving—that I bought a bottle. Perhaps I will bring one in. I did wonder whether the House of Commons authorities might start serving Test Valley Gin in the bars. It is an excellent drink, infused with a secret recipe of local herbs and spices, and I can recommend it.

Michael Tomlinson: I had the great pleasure of being in my hon. Friend’s constituency yesterday, although I beg his forgiveness for not seeking his permission. Hon. Members will be pleased to know that I went purely for a cricket match, and I did not think that I was obligated to seek his permission to play cricket in his wonderful constituency. He is making an important point. Broadband is increasingly important in all our constituencies, and I believe it is as important as road and rail. It is a part of our infrastructure that our constituents just cannot do without.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is very welcome to visit my constituency at any time. In fact, I am surprised that he has only been once recently, and he should come more often. My door is always open.

Ensuring that villages are connected to the world is becoming vital to maintaining rural life. Rural residents find it increasingly ridiculous that they can see broadcast-quality footage of Tim Peake in the international space station but they cannot go online and post complimentary comments on my Facebook page, as my constituents increasingly seem to do.

Simon Hoare: I suggest to my hon. Friend that his constituents might wish to do the former more often than the latter.

Kit Malthouse: I think that is rather churlish of my hon. Friend, given how complimentary I have been about him. I hope that one day I will reach the level of popularity and name recognition in my constituency that Commander Peake has reached in the world.

Small business is becoming increasingly important in rural areas. Some 25% of small businesses—nearly half a million—are located in rural areas, where they provide lots of employment and create wealth. The Bill points to a wider issue with which the House will have to grapple over the next few years—the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) mentioned it—and that is the appropriateness of the business rate system. We are applying a tax first devised in 1572 to a 21st-century economy, much of which exists somewhere in the cloud. The Bill acknowledges at its core the disproportionate impact of business rates on competition in this sector. Those of us who have rural constituencies—indeed, anybody whose constituency contains a high street—understand the disproportionality of business rates for retail businesses, particularly now that more and more people buy things online, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset said. If we are to keep our high streets vibrant, keep our businesses working and maintain the competitiveness of the rural economy against the huge businesses that these days operate from nowhere, I question whether taxing property—frankly, taxing investment and expansion—remains an appropriate way to gather the revenue that we need.

There will come a point, over the next couple of decades, when we have to consider shifting taxation on corporations away from property and profit, and towards turnover. If we taxed the turnover of the large multinationals—the Googles and the Amazons—we would collect more from them than we currently do, but in a fair way. Small shops on the high streets in North West Hampshire compete with corporations that transact in this country, dispatch goods from a second country and book the profits in a third country. We have to think about the asymmetric nature of the taxation of those organisations if we want to create a level playing field for competition.

I welcome the Bill. I welcome the move towards the designation of broadband as a utility and the recognition of the distortive effect of business rates on commerce. I hope that over the next five years or so, many companies will take advantage of the rate relief window. I suspect that at the end of that period it will be somehow extended, and I hope that any such extension will become permanent. I hope that businesses will take advantage of the window and come to North West Hampshire to plaster my entire constituency with broadband fibre, to the cabinet and to the premises, with my pleasure and approval.

7.7 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Like several Members here, I have the pleasure of representing a beautiful and very rural constituency. In fact, 42% of my constituency is part of an area of outstanding natural beauty. It is a lovely constituency in which to walk, have picnics and spend time. It is fabulous for farming, but less good for connectivity.

[*Helen Whately*]

Over the two-and-a-bit years for which I have been the Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent, I have received letters—and occasionally emails, if people have managed to get online—from constituents in many villages including Headcorn, Kingswood, Doddington, Eastling, Selling and Sheldwich. Those are all lovely villages, but they struggle with connectivity, and residents have had difficulty getting fast broadband.

In several of those villages, it can be difficult even to get a mobile phone signal. A couple of months ago, during the general election campaign, I was in Headcorn, and I thought I might tweet a picture from Headcorn station. Not only did I not have 4G on my mobile phone, but I did not have any mobile phone signal at all. I could not even make an old-fashioned mobile telephone call or send a text message. There are parts of my constituency, such as that patch of Headcorn, where unless people happen to be with the one operator serving it a little, it is impossible even to make a mobile phone call.

My constituency wants to have better broadband and better mobile phone connections, and that is why I welcome the commitment this Government have been and are making to connectivity across this country. As I mentioned in an intervention, thanks to the Government's programme of rolling out high-speed broadband, 8,432 properties have now got a high-speed broadband connection that would not have had one without the programme. By September 2018, I am expecting about 2,000 more properties to be on high-speed broadband thanks to the programme. That amounts to 25% of the properties in my constituency being connected thanks to this Government's work and commitment to high-speed broadband, and it will get Faversham and Mid Kent up to about 90% of properties being on high-speed broadband.

We are still some way off the 100% level that I would like, so I very much welcome the universal service obligation that is coming into force. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) in campaigning very hard to put that into law. I also welcome the commitment made earlier by my right hon. Friend the Minister from the Dispatch Box that the financial cap will be high enough to make sure that 100% of properties in constituencies such as mine receive access to broadband of at least 10 megabits per second. That is not the high speed that we hope will be delivered by the Bill, but for those who have no or incredibly slow broadband at the moment, 10 megabits per second will make a great difference.

All of us who represent rural constituencies know the difference between the haves and the have-nots on broadband, but having high-speed broadband is genuinely life changing. It enables us to do things that we now consider everyday functions of life, and whether it is sending emails, booking tickets or flights online, choosing hotels or B&Bs, comparing offers on travel insurance or car insurance, or shopping for groceries, there is so much that those of us with high-speed broadband take for granted. However, in my constituency, some people still do not even have such access.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend not add watching BBC Parliament so that all her constituents in Faversham and Mid Kent can see her excellent speech?

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend very much, although I doubt whether even one of my constituents is watching my speech. I will not hold my breath while waiting for confirmation.

We know that children, including mine, often get set homework tasks requiring them to look up things on the internet. If a child lives in a rural village or at the end of a track and they cannot get online, they are disadvantaged. There is also the very basic thing of staying in touch with distant relatives, who often live all around the world. I remember when I was a child that the cost of making an international call was enormous. During my gap year as an 18-year-old, I made two phone calls to my parents in nine months, because it cost such a huge amount to phone home, but people can now make video calls basically for nothing so families around the world can stay in touch. As older people go online—many people in their 70s, 80s and 90s are very active internet users—I hope that the internet will be one way in which we can tackle the challenge of loneliness. For someone to make a FaceTime call to their grandma or grandpa is a great way for them to keep in touch, and that is often much easier if it is very difficult to go to see them.

There is also the question of the use of the internet for work, where it can make a huge difference for rural areas, as it does for the economy in general. It enables people to work from home—I have two caseworkers who do most of their work supporting me and my constituents from home, which enables them to juggle that work and their family commitments—and I know that a huge number of people in my constituency now run businesses from home, including many quite significant rural businesses. There is a fabulous business called Bombus around the corner from where I live just outside Faversham, which makes amazing products out of maps. If any hon. Members want interesting products based on maps of their constituencies, I recommend that they contact Bombus to get all sorts of books, paper goods and lampshades. On the other side of my constituency, near Maidstone, a business enabling people to compare utility prices has about 100 employees in a really rural spot. There is no way in which that business could exist without good broadband, so it is very important for the rural economy.

We have got to this point very quickly. About 12 years ago I worked at AOL Time Warner launching digital products, such as the UK's first video on-demand service for downloading films. Back then, just over 10 years ago, people had to plan ahead: if they wanted to watch a film, they had to start downloading it and then go away, perhaps to cook something for supper, and come back a couple of hours later when enough of it had downloaded to enable them to watch it, if they were lucky, although it may well have stopped downloading halfway through. We probably launched the product a little ahead of what the technology could do. Now, however, my children sit down in front of the television on a Sunday morning, when I am trying to catch up on some sleep, turn on the iPlayer and watch something immediately, with none of that delay. That change has turned watching television into a completely different experience.

I welcome the Government's commitment to this area, but I very much ask them to press on with making sure that we get high-speed broadband to 100% of properties across constituencies such as mine. I also ask

them to make sure that the new technologies enabled by the Bill such as 5G and full-fibre broadband—I will now turn to the Bill—benefit those not only in more urban areas of the country, but in rural areas. I would ask that as far as possible that should not be a simple sequential process, with the people of Headcorn being able, if they are lucky, to make a phone call and then getting 3G, 4G and eventually 5G sometime in the distant future. I am very keen for some leapfrogging so that those in more rural areas can catch up thanks to new forms of technology.

It is particularly important for the Bill to go ahead, with investment in these new technologies, in the challenging economic climate and the challenging economic times in which we live. I am very mindful of the ageing population in this country. We have talked a lot during the past couple of weeks about the cost of the public sector and the desire to increase the pay of people working in the public sector. We know that as a country we face a productivity challenge in that we are not nearly as productive as we need to be for people to have a good or a better standard of living, and we face global competition. I am pretty realistic in saying that—unfortunately, unlike the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who wishes to raise business rates and thinks, erroneously, that that will increase revenue to spend on public services—history tells us that, as we very well know, increasing business rates results in a fall in revenue.

Andrew Gwynne rose—

Helen Whately: As the hon. Gentleman gave way to me, I will give way to him.

Andrew Gwynne: I merely wish to correct the record: at no stage have either I or the Labour party said that we want to increase business rates. We want a small increase in corporation tax, which would still result in our having one of the lowest rates of corporation tax in the world.

Helen Whately: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's putting the record straight, because I made an error in my notes. Instead of business rates, I meant to say corporation tax. We disagreed about this point earlier. My point about corporation tax stands. Unfortunately, raising corporation tax results in a reduction in revenue for the Government, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) pointed out.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Was she as shocked as I was to hear the shadow Secretary of State refer to a “small” increase in corporation tax, because the rate Labour would move it to would be almost a 50% increase on the 17% rate that we will have?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This point really is significant because as corporation tax rates come down below 20%, businesses behave differently. Businesses are more likely to locate in this country, to invest in their businesses in this country and to create jobs, which is what my constituents and, I am sure, the constituents of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish want. That also generates the revenue that is paid in taxes to fund public services.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): On the subject of large increases, given that the hon. Lady would be outraged by a 50% increase, she must be absolutely distraught at the business rates revaluation, which has seen some business rates go up by 200%.

Helen Whately: In some respects, the hon. Gentleman and I may agree, although not on the specifics of his point. As other hon. Members have said, the business rates system does need a further look. For instance, I am unhappy with the way business rates tend to penalise high street shops in some of my smaller towns. The largest employer in my constituency is a brewer, and pubs have struggled with some of the increases in business rates. However, I recognise the efforts that the Chancellor made following lobbying by me and other Members of Parliament to help pubs with the changes to business rates. There is no question but that there is further work to be done on business rates, and that has been acknowledged by the Government.

Michael Tomlinson: May I take my hon. Friend back to corporation tax? She is absolutely right that the reduction in the rate has seen an increase in tax take. Surely the important thing is to look not at the tax rate, but at the tax take—how much tax is actually raised. The final point she made about jobs is crucial. We see record levels of employment across all our constituencies, which is to be welcomed. That has happened because businesses want to expand and take on more people.

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will return to the content of the Bill in a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am spending a little time on corporation tax because the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish spent some time talking about it. It is important that Government Members make it clear that we are absolutely committed to raising revenue for public services. The last thing we want to see is tax changes that gain the right headlines but have the wrong effect on the bottom line from the Government's point of view. We are absolutely committed to making sure that we can raise revenue for public services, about which we care very much, but we recognise that, to do so, we must have a tax environment that is supportive to businesses, because they are what provides the jobs and the economic growth.

On economic growth and people working harder to keep up their standard of living, as an economy, we need to be more productive and technology is the crucial enabler in that. That is exactly what the Bill will support. For instance, 5G as a technology is and will be a great enabler of the internet of things. Every second around the world, 127 devices are newly connected to the internet. That rate will surely increase, so the demand for connectivity and the ability to carry large volumes of data will only go up.

It is vital that we are at the forefront of that. In fact, 5G is forecast to boost economic value by \$4 trillion to \$11 trillion globally by 2020. That is a huge increase in economic value, so it is vital that we as a country take our share of that economic growth. In practice, it will mean developments that allow us to have smart household appliances, driverless cars and, one day, driverless lorries, which for my constituents, who are very unhappy about lorries being parked up in laybys a lot, will be an interesting prospect.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend and I both have residents and businesses that face the plight of HGV fly-parking. I know that she, too, is very passionate about this. Does she agree that, as technology advances, we should look at different ways of doing business?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sure that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) will find an ingenious way of relating the intervention by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) precisely to the Bill. I can see a way of doing it and I am sure she will succeed.

Helen Whately: I could see the frown on your face, Madam Deputy Speaker. It might seem like a stretch to go from talking about telecommunications to lorry fly-parking, but as 5G is an enabler of the internet of things and, potentially, of driverless cars and driverless lorries, it might mean that lorry drivers no longer have to take long breaks to sleep. The reason lorries are parked in the laybys of our roads is that the drivers are sleeping because they have to have a compulsory rest before they can keep driving, but we could have lorries without a driver, so the subjects genuinely connect.

To return to what I was planning to talk about, another important potential application of 5G is in healthcare, with wearable devices. For instance, people's heart rate and blood pressure could be tracked. That is very much part of the future of healthcare and preventive healthcare to help us all to look after ourselves. As somebody who is very committed to the NHS and to making sure we have a sustainable NHS and a healthier population, I am keen that we enable such developments in healthcare.

Those are just a handful of examples of what we hope 5G will enable. We hope to be at the forefront of this technology by investing in it.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time, but before she moves away from 5G, I invite her to reflect on this point. It is important not to leave behind those communities that are yet to clock on to 3G and 4G. I am sure that, in her constituency, as in mine, there are areas where people simply cannot access 3G or 4G. Although 5G is to be welcomed, will she join me in calling on the Government to ensure that those areas are not left behind?

Helen Whately: I completely agree. As in his constituency, there are parts of my constituency that do not have 4G, 3G or even enough mobile signal to make a phone call. I am very keen for the Government to intervene to ensure that there is comprehensive mobile phone reception across rural areas. I also hope that we can have a catch-up for those areas, so that they can canter quickly through 3G and 4G and then go straight to 5G.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): While we are on the subject of notspots and blackout areas, does my hon. Friend agree that there are priority areas such as along railway lines? Many of my constituents commute every day and it is so frustrating not even being able to get a phone signal on the railway line. The Bill will enable extra infrastructure, so that we have connected commuters, which is key in the 21st century.

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend has made an important point about the Bill's focus on the infrastructure along routes such as rail lines and motorways, where it will be of particular benefit. My constituency, like hers, contains commuters who would like to be able to do more work on the train, and the Bill will make that possible.

Full-fibre broadband should bring an end to a problem about which I often hear from BT engineers: the challenge of the "last mile", the old copper wires that are so dated, some of them more than 100 years old. Although that technology has served us very well for many years, it is probably time to move on, so that people can get proper high-speed broadband, especially those who live further away from the cabinet and the traditional infrastructure.

It is right for the Government to support the development of new infrastructure by providing incentives in the form of appropriate conditions for substantial private investment in that infrastructure, which will multiply by many times the investment that they are making with the use of taxpayer funds. The combination of the £400 million digital infrastructure fund and the £60 million business rates relief for which the Bill provides should be wearable for the Government, while also resulting in much more investment in the country's digital infrastructure, which we badly need.

I want to ensure that we reach out to and communicate with younger voters. I say to them, "You may not be watching the Parliament channel on your internet connection, but take note of what is being said." This is an example of the Government's looking ahead to the sort of economy that we need for the future: looking towards investing in the infrastructure that we need, so that we will be able to compete globally, have a modern economy, have innovation and have the kind of jobs and the kind of economy that will give younger workers opportunities for decades to come, and give us the economic growth that we need in order to fund a high standard of living and the public services about which we care so much.

7.32 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Let me begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), although he is no longer in the Chamber—and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)—for being so kind about the work that I have done on broadband. When my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset said that I would not speak in the debate, I was going to leap to my feet like some sort of digital gazelle, but I thought I would keep the House waiting. We have heard several extensive speeches about the many benefits of Government investment in digital infrastructure, but my speech will be somewhat briefer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said that some of her constituents were not able to do something as old-fashioned as making a mobile telephone call. Mobile telephone calls are, in our modern world, pretty old-fashioned, but we should not forget that not many years ago they were simply impossible in this place. Since then, we have not only been through the period of the invention of mobile phones; we have been through a period during which all our constituents railed against the installation of mobile phone masts.

Now we have come full circle, and they rail against the absence of mobile phone masts. The digital revolution has thoroughly revolved.

I want to make some brief points about the Bill. It seems obvious to me that, although adopting this approach to encouraging digital infrastructure investment means that the Government are forgoing a certain amount of revenue from business rates, their fostering of digital innovation and infrastructure investment will ensure that the amount they get back through the broader benefits of economic growth is many times greater than the amount that the business rates themselves cost the state and the taxpayer. That strikes me as a definition of the way in which the Government should be using public money, pump-priming economic growth to allow the development of an economy that works in the digital way that, as we have heard, our children will expect, and that all modern businesses already expect.

I commend the Government for taking that approach. It is also commendable that, by giving the relief a five-year term—which my right hon. Friend the Minister hinted could even be extended—they are giving firms an incentive to invest in installing fibre now, even if they do not turn it on, so to speak, for a number of years. I hope that we will secure the economies of scale of broader investment while continuing to benefit from business rate relief on that investment. That can only be a good thing, and it also addresses some of the concerns raised by the industry before the introduction of the Bill.

We should bear in mind that the growth in demand for fibre will only increase. When I was a journalist writing about the launch of the iPlayer—the BBC cunningly launched it in Christmas Day, because it knew that demand would be rather more limited—the BBC did not think for one moment that it would itself be broadcasting in 4K come 2016-17. Still less did it think that we would, as a matter of course, live in households in which half a dozen people wanted to download the 4K streams that broadcasters now routinely provide.

It is no small irony that, by all accounts, when Bazalgette built the London sewers he offered quadruple the capacity that was required in Victorian London. Now we see that that quadruple capacity has been more than exhausted by a growing population, and we should take the same approach when it comes to investing in our digital infrastructure. To point out that a prominent Bazalgette is still involved in the life of our digital nation is not in any way to draw a comparison between sewage and the modern digital output with which he is concerned. The huge benefits provided by the man who brought us “Big Brother” and a host of other programmes are not to be described in that way in the slightest degree. All we can say is that this is clearly a family that has contributed a huge amount to the life of our nation, at every level of our infrastructure.

In this day and age, there is never an excuse for underestimating the amount of digital capacity that we will require. Although 4K may appear to be perfectly adequate for our purposes today, we will look back on it in a number of years and see that it is paltry in comparison with what we will be using on a routine basis, whether that involves virtual reality, driverless cars, or all the technologies that will eradicate the digital scourge of fly-parking mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling).

We should not only encourage the Government to proceed with the Bill as quickly as possible, but encourage any Government to ensure that this sort of rate relief applies to investment in digital infrastructure, whether mobile or fixed, thus ensuring—following the launch of the iPlayer not so very long ago—that the internet of things that is now coming upon us will be fully served. That will be thanks to the investment of Governments such as this.

7.39 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), who is a real expert in this field, as he has demonstrated tonight. I have to admit that I am a technology dinosaur; when it comes to communications, if I have a choice between email, text or telephone, I will choose an actual conversation every single time. It takes an awful lot less time to pick up the phone and have a conversation one to one than to compose lengthy emails that often can take hours to construct by virtue of the need to check the content and tone, or to correspond via text messages; at present I have about eight text messages building up, and I will no doubt forget to respond to all of them.

I welcome this Bill, which provides business rate relief for new fibre infrastructure. Its measures form part of a wider package that rightly encourages investment in our country’s digital infrastructure and that helps ensure that Britain remains a digital world leader. The Bill will help homes and businesses across the country have faster, more affordable and more reliable broadband connectivity.

We have heard this evening from many Members who represent constituencies very different from mine. Many of their areas are very rural, and we have heard from them about issues of the connectivity of mobile and broadband in rural areas. My constituency is not like that: I have mainly towns and one large village—Cannock, Hednesford, Rugeley and Norton Canes. There is limited rural space in my constituency; my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) is one of my near-neighbours, and I see her nodding, as she recognises what my constituency is like.

I also have a forest in my constituency. If someone is driving through the forest of Cannock Chase and I, as a passenger, am having a phone conversation, the chances are that the phone call will cut off; I must add that I am on wireless, not Bluetooth. This is an issue in the more rural parts of my constituency. The measures in the Bill that make broadband and mobile access much better will be welcomed by people and businesses across the country, including in my constituency.

Wendy Morton: Does my hon. Friend agree that although her constituency, like mine, is not predominantly rural, we can still find notspots—not just in forests and so forth, but in the more built-up areas?

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend is right, and I will come on to some specific issues later in my speech.

My office is on Market Street in the heart of Hednesford, yet when I am there, more often than not I cannot make telephone calls because I do not have any mobile phone reception. When I am travelling between my office and my home as well, invariably the mobile phone reception falls.

[Amanda Milling]

Why is broadband and mobile access so important? As Members have said, it is key to family and our daily lives. We can keep in contact with our friends across the world through Facebook and social media. We have talked about the closure of high street bank branches across the country because people are increasingly doing their banking online, but they need excellent online access to be able to do that. I am not sure that any Members have mentioned being able to switch energy suppliers. We talk about people trying to get better rates for their gas and electricity, and that is often best done by looking at online portals. If people do not have good internet access, the range of deals they can get is restricted.

We have talked about watching television, too. Personally, I just switch the TV on; that goes back to my being a bit of a dinosaur. Many people, however, use iPlayer and on-demand services. My mother, for instance, has never used a computer, but a few years ago we got her iPlayer and she is absolutely reliant on it for communicating with people and watching television, but she has to have excellent broadband access to do that.

I want to raise some specific issues in terms of broadband access and the roll-out of full fibre connectivity. A number of my constituents live on a new housing development called Chasewater Grange, and they complain of painfully slow broadband speeds. It is a new Taylor Wimpey development on the edge of Norton Canes. There are about 130 houses. Despite being billed as a superb collection of high-quality homes, with a mix of house types to suite a range of tastes, including three and four-bedroom homes, all with easy access to local amenities—which I fully support; they are fantastic, and it is a fantastic development—the one thing the local residents do not enjoy is fast and reliable broadband access.

On building a new housing scheme, developers install gas, electricity and water as a matter of course, but we are now in a time when broadband is the fourth utility. The provision of superfast broadband should be treated in the same way as the other utilities. The problem is not unique to Chasewater Grange. I have done quite a lot of research on this issue over previous days, and I have been reading endless reports of residents of new developments up and down the country facing similar issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) is not in his place at present, but he made the point that this problem has been recognised, and last year an agreement was reached between the Government, Openreach and the Home Builders Federation to ensure that superfast and ultrafast broadband connectivity would be either provided free or co-funded by Openreach to new developments. This has been extended to all developments with more than 30 homes, and connection will be free. We rightly place emphasis on building new homes; we often talk about the issue in the Chamber. So I am pleased that there is recognition that broadband connectivity is as important as the other utilities. Homebuyers expect this.

The issue is particularly important in my constituency, because thousands of new homes are being built all the time. When I drive around the constituency, I never cease to be amazed by the number of new developments. In the Pye Green valley and in Brereton, where I live,

homes are being built all the time, and we must make sure they have access to both the main utilities and also broadband.

The moves made by Openreach and the Home Builders Federation are good news, but they are not going to resolve the issues faced by the residents of Chasewater Grange. I was very pleased to learn last week that that community has made some progress in securing funding from both Openreach and Taylor Wimpey to complete the work to install the fibre-based broadband. However, the residents of Chasewater Grange still face a funding shortfall, and they are communicating at present with Superfast Staffordshire. I hope they succeed in securing some assistance to be able to bridge the gap and ensure that this fibre broadband is connected.

I hope that as a result the residents of Chasewater Grange will soon be able to enjoy the benefits of fast and reliable broadband, and be able to do their banking online, and that the teenagers will be able to do their homework online—I am sure that we would all agree that it is important that they can complete their assignments. I also hope that those residents who want to work from home will be able to do so. The issues relating to broadband speeds are not confined to Chasewater Grange. I know of homes on Sweetbriar Way, for example, that have been waiting years for this connectivity. I also have a small number of rural properties in my constituency, and they are still waiting, too.

I want to turn to a more positive aspect of fast broadband access. The redevelopment of the Rugeley B power station site will present opportunities to tap into existing superfast broadband infrastructure. The power station sits right alongside the west coast main line, which has the superfast broadband network running up the line. Similarly, the canal network in the area has that infrastructure. The power station site benefits from the railway line and the canals; it also has national grid infrastructure. I have described it before in the House as a connectivity crossover, and we need to make the most of it. It presents an ideal opportunity to attract high-tech businesses and advanced manufacturing that can make the most of the infrastructure.

The power station site is huge, and there will also be some homes on it. I have talked about the need to bring broadband infrastructure to the door in new housing developments. The superfast broadband line is very close to this development, and we need to make the most of it—not only for today but for future generations. There is a real opportunity to ensure that the regeneration of this power station site attracts the businesses that will create highly skilled, highly paid jobs for those future generations. As I have said before—and will probably say again to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones)—we need to have ambitious, bold and visionary plans for Rugeley.

There is another site in my constituency that has excellent digital infrastructure, and again, we need to make the most of it. It is the Cannock campus of the South Staffordshire College. It was very disappointing to hear recently that it is to shut owing to falling numbers, because it had received a multi-million pound investment a few years ago, part of which provided it with excellent digital infrastructure. We need to make the most of this site as we look at plans for its future. We need to tap into that digital infrastructure.

I am sure that many other Members want to speak in this important debate, but I want to come back to the Bill that we are discussing tonight. It is part of a wide range of reforms that the Government are undertaking to ensure that we have excellent digital infrastructure across our country. I welcome the Bill. I welcome the fact that it will enable my constituency and others to have faster, more reliable broadband and to enjoy all the benefits that the internet and emails offer us.

7.54 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As always, it is a pleasure to follow my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling). It is also a pleasure to take part in the debate. Before I get into the detail of my speech, I should like to thank the Minister for Digital, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who is no longer in his place, for giving me a comprehensive response to what I thought was a simple, straightforward intervention earlier. I asked him about the five-year limit and the deadline for the business rate relief, which was an important point. If the Bill can incentivise companies to really get behind investment in our digital infrastructure, that will be a good thing. It will have far-reaching benefits.

The Bill made me think of a couple of things. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase described herself as a “technology dinosaur”, but I would describe myself as a technophobe. The challenges with the internet connection that we have faced here in Parliament in recent weeks have been frustrating, to say the least. All I will say is that it is very handy to have a staff member on your team who is a good bit younger than you are. I have found that they know everything about the internet, and they have been a huge help to me.

I am also reminded of the time, probably 20 to 25 years ago, when we first started to see the internet appear—I use the word “appear” because that is how it felt—and we had our first internet connection. It was a big thing to have the internet at home. I seem to recall that there was no such thing as wireless internet. There was a wire that led from downstairs to upstairs, and we had to plug it in and unplug it. It was impossible for more than one person at a time to be on a computer. How things have changed!

I am also reminded of the first mobile phone that we had. I could not fit it into my quite large handbag. It was almost the size of a brick, and I used to walk around with it. It had an aerial and a handset with a curly cable attached. Again, how things have progressed! Who would have imagined that we would be here this evening talking about 5G—

Andrew Gwynne: Perhaps my nostalgia is greater than the hon. Lady’s, because I believe that my Nokia “brick” was far more reliable than my Apple iPhone has ever been.

Wendy Morton: I bow to the hon. Gentleman’s judgment on that one. Sadly, I did not have much chance to use the “brick”; I seem to my recall that my husband used it more than I did. However, I do have my own iPhone these days, so things have changed. Today, we can stream films into our homes and download music. I have something that I call the boogie box. I can have it in the kitchen or move it around the house, and it picks

up the music from my iPhone. It is just amazing what we can do and how technology has changed our lives. It has also changed business and so many other things.

The Bill is relatively short, but it is very important. It gives effect to one of the commitments on digital communications that were made in last year’s autumn statement. It is also important because it aims to give targeted support to the roll-out of full-fibre broadband connections and 5G mobile communications. Often, when we talk about infrastructure in this place, we are talking about roads, railways or bridges. We are talking about very visible and tangible pieces of infrastructure. That infrastructure obviously matters to the local area, as well as regionally or nationally, but occasionally something that seems small can have a much more far-reaching impact.

This Bill is about a piece of infrastructure that is far less visible. We see the green broadband boxes as we drive round our constituencies, but we cannot see the full-fibre broadband. We will know it is there, however, because we will be able to access it. Although the technology is not visible, the Bill will enable full-fibre broadband to reach across England and Wales to the benefit of residents and businesses across the country and across my constituency.

Many hon. Members have given examples this evening of where broadband makes a difference in their constituencies—an individual household, a small retail business, a large manufacturer in a business park or someone working in the gig economy. Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of the local economy in my constituency. Whether in the shops of Aldridge village centre or in one of our many and varied business parks, businesses are creating jobs, driving the investment that is reducing unemployment, and developing skills for today and for the future. Such businesses may use the internet to sell their goods, to order components or materials, or to run their customer service. The internet is now an integral part of business.

Amanda Milling: Access to the internet is as important as electricity. If the lights go out and the power goes off, a manufacturing business will not be able to produce its goods. In the same way, if a business is reliant on the internet, it can grind to a halt without it.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Before entering this place, I worked in the optical industry, and our business relied on the internet day in, day out for processing orders and for sending stock back to Europe. The minute the internet went down we could do nothing at all, which shows how crucial connectivity is.

The Bill is vital, because under current broadband, superfast broadband and mobile coverage we still get some so-called notspots. We have rightly heard many contributions from hon. Members representing rural constituencies. My constituency does not fall into that category, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase that rural constituencies are not the only ones that are affected. We have notspots in my constituency, and I even find that I have to move around in my own home from time to time to get a mobile connection. Were it not for the wi-fi connection, I would struggle on many a day. I hope that the days of having to lean out of the kitchen window or move to a certain spot in the living room to get some mobile signal will soon be a thing of the past.

[*Wendy Morton*]

We have heard a lot about businesses and individuals tonight, but this Bill is not just about them. I am thinking of my constituency's many voluntary organisations and charities, many of which provide lifelines to local residents. They too rely on having a good internet connection. Through their webpages, they allow people to get information 24 hours a day. Through the internet, we are able to reach much further than we could in the past.

I want to follow up on something said by some other hon. Members about demographics and age. Access to the internet has the potential to cut across all parts of society. If an older person has good internet access, they can keep in touch with their family through Facebook or FaceTime—things that we did not have a few years ago. If someone has grandchildren living on the other side of the country, or even on the other side of town, and wants to connect with them on a more frequent basis much more cheaply than by using the telephone, that can be facilitated through a good internet connection.

When I go into a school, as all hon. Members do, and have a debate either with primary school children or, more often than not, older secondary school children, the very valid question, “What do the Government do for us as young people?” often comes up. Sitting here today has made me realise that this Bill is an example of something that the Government are doing that will help young people. The younger generation are probably more tech and phone-savvy than all of us here put together—I can certainly speak for myself on that.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend will agree that the age disparity between young and old can be bridged through the internet and through proper broadband and mobile connections, particularly in rural constituencies and especially those in Scotland. Although some powers have been devolved—unfortunately no SNP Members are here tonight to speak on such an important issue—I hope that my hon. Friend and the Minister will recognise the important role that Westminster can play in all the nations of the UK by giving funding and offering direction for broadband and mobile.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This Bill is for England and Wales, not for Scotland. That is the problem, so we need to deal with England and Wales and not drift too far.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) for making that valuable point. I am sure that I will be corrected if I am wrong, but although this Bill relates to England and Wales only, Barnett formula consequentials will apply, so my new hon. Friend from Scotland made a valid point.

The Bill is about looking to the future. It is about developing infrastructure, so that we can take our country forwards. As we seek to develop new relationships and partnerships in a post-Brexit world, the Bill will make connectivity around the world so much easier and better.

Turning briefly to business rates, the Bill will enable 100% business rates relief for new full-fibre infrastructure for a period of five years. I hope that that will provide an incentive and encourage the telecommunications

industry to get on with the job of delivering what we in this House want to see. Together with the universal service obligation, I hope that rates relief will make a significant difference to our constituents. I hope that we will make a big contribution towards closing the digital divide that we have heard so much about and that we will get higher-quality, more reliable connectivity in households and businesses. That is what I want in my constituency and what other Members want for theirs. In closing, I am supporting a Government who are investing in our country, in our infrastructure and in the livelihoods and futures of not just today's generation but tomorrow's as well, so I will support the Bill this evening.

8.9 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who addressed the substance of this important Bill with her customary attention to detail and her personal reflections on the progress that the internet has made. The change it has made to all our lives has been enormously valuable.

I will address the core of the Bill first, before explaining why it is so important. It is excellent that the Bill will provide for 100% business rates relief for full fibre infrastructure for a five-year period from 1 April 2017, and it is important that that is backdated so that it truly supports telecommunications companies that invest in their fibre network. It is also important that the Government will cover the full costs of that relief. As a former councillor, I know the impact that Government reliefs can have on local government, and it is important to note that the Government have said here that, because of the measure's importance, they will meet the full cost of the relief.

I am grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) for mentioning the impact on Scotland. The Bill, of course, has territorial extent to England and Wales, but the Barnett formula applies, so it is important that we recognise how it affects the whole United Kingdom.

As we have heard, constituencies vary across the UK, from tightly packed urban settings to sparser rural settings. Superfast broadband, based on part-fibre, part-copper technology as today, is now available to 93% of premises, which is good progress. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills spoke about the progress of the internet, and I recall having a dial-up modem that would beep away before connecting at perhaps 28 kilobits per second—FaceTime or Skype would have been inconceivable in those days. We have made huge progress, and 93% of premises being able to access the part-copper, part-fibre service is good news, but the proposed relief provides—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—£60 million-worth of support to telecoms companies that invest in their fibre network by installing new fibre lines.

Virgin Media is now part of Liberty Global, which, to deviate slightly, shows the importance of having a competitive corporation tax regime. As has already been noted, a competitive corporation tax regime means a company such as Liberty has invested in Britain and bought Virgin Media, and is now taking it forward. I would have thought that the Bill will boost Virgin

Media's £3 billion "project lightning" network expansion, as well as plans by Openreach, a subsidiary of BT, to increase its investment in fibre optic. The Bill will also help smaller alternative players, which my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) said were priced out of the market in the past due to the impact of business rates and other competitive and regulatory pressures.

I welcome the Government's aim, through this and other measures, to provide superfast broadband speeds of 24 megabits per second, or more, for at least 95% of the United Kingdom, which is progress beyond what we have achieved to date, but we should go further. That is why I am pleased that the Digital Economy Act 2017 provides for every household to have a legal right to request a fast broadband connection.

Michael Tomlinson: I do not apologise for reinforcing the important point, in case Opposition Members say it has already been made, that 95% coverage still means that 5% of our constituents are left out, so will my hon. Friend join me in pressing the Government to ensure that the service is truly universal? Although we welcome the measures set out in the Bill, we are still speaking up for our constituents, the remaining 5%, who are waiting.

Mr Jayawardena: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important and cogent point. He is right to champion the interests of all the United Kingdom, which is why the universal service obligation is so important. The obligation, I am sure the Minister will agree, is only the first step towards ensuring that Britain is the most competitive country and is the place where businesses based elsewhere in the world want to do business. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills also noted, that is even more important in a post-Brexit world. We must ensure that we are absolutely match fit and ready to go in the next century, which is why it is important that every household has a legal right to request a fast broadband connection.

As has become customary in our Wednesday exchanges, I will reference points raised by my constituents. This is not a maiden speech, but Hazeley Lea, a lovely part of my constituency, gets less than half a megabit per second, which is totally unacceptable. Worse, residents say that they have too much downtime because the current connection—part-copper, part-fibre—is unreliable. It is not just homes, individuals and families but diversified rural businesses that are affected. One constituent says:

"Just yesterday, I saw a third visit this week by Openreach to my immediate neighbour. I took the opportunity to talk to the engineer on site who confirmed there was a major problem perhaps with old underground cabling to the area simply giving up. He also confirmed that none of the line managers are likely to take this further because of the costs to BT to supply new cabling."

That demonstrates that what the Government are trying to do is right. Not only are they addressing the old underground cabling that is simply giving up—the cabling was introduced many, many years ago for technologies that are now old-fashioned, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said—but they are tackling the costs that apply to businesses through business rates and other regulatory matters. The costs, particularly business rates, have been prohibitive in helping businesses to invest.

I was on a British-American Parliamentary Group visit to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where the weather was almost as good as it has been here recently. Importantly, I found out that a £70 million grant had got local people—the Chattanooga area has a population of just over 500,000—not 24 megabits per second, which is the UK Government's measure of success in this phase of superfast broadband, but 1 gigabit per second through providing fibre to the premises, not just fibre to the cabinet. That is what the Government are trying to do, and it is the way forward.

Coming back across the pond to Stratfield Saye, the seat of the Duke of Wellington, the exchange there is a problem because, at present, the broadband connection given to my constituents, and undoubtedly to the Duke of Wellington, comes from Mortimer across the county boundary in Berkshire, instead of from Bramley in my constituency and the county of Hampshire. Naturally, Bramley is much closer to Stratfield Saye than Mortimer will ever be. Indeed, the length of cabling required from the exchange to the home would be cut in half if the connection were provided from Bramley. That shows the lack of flexibility in the system. We need to ensure that there is the right technology in the right places to serve people in the 21st century, not the convenience of telecommunications operators from the 20th century.

Some people in Bramley are nearer Chineham in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), but none the less they are connected by cables from Bramley. Those cables are actually steel, not copper, because apparently when the cables were installed by BT, then state-owned—I do not know whether the Labour party plans to renationalise BT, too—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) says it is a possibility, so perhaps he would like to clarify the matter at the Dispatch Box. The point I was making was that BT simply said, "It is all right, we don't have to face any competition. We'll just shove some steel cabling in there and it doesn't matter what happens to local people." Of course when we were talking about telephone and analogue technology, that was fine, but we are in this new digital age now and we need to make sure people have the right technology to their doorstep. That is why we must tackle this head-on.

I do not want to be totally critical of BT, as it has done a lot of good work in enabling a lot of cabinets and coming up with flexibility in the way those things are delivered. For example, in the parish of Ellisfield in my constituency BT came up with a match funding scheme that said, "If the community can raise some of the money, we will put in the other half." That is a very innovative scheme for a community so rural that it made this commercially unviable to deliver. But therein lies the problem: no one should be penalised for accessing what is now a utility, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) rightly said—people should be able to expect this. Charging people £558 per dwelling not only is on the cusp of what BT might ordinarily provide as a commercial arrangement, but it was penalising residents in rural areas for living where they do.

Michael Tomlinson: May I take my hon. Friend from Hampshire to Dorset and endorse what he is saying? He is advocating greater flexibility within BT and saying that although some good work is being done, more

[Michael Tomlinson]

could and should be done. Does he agree that we need flexibility across the piece, not just in Hampshire and his beautiful constituency, so that where difficult rural issues arise, sensible solutions are found?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend makes an important further contribution to this debate and is right in what he says. Let me take him back to the further remarks from my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire, who pointed out that Brexit provides an opportunity, because EU state aid legislation got in the way of allowing local communities to come up with solutions. When I was a local councillor, we introduced CITI—the communications improvement and technology infrastructure fund—which was a new way of providing match funding from the borough council, but it was then ruled out of order because it was deemed “state aid”. Not only had we, through careful management, kept council tax down and not increased it, by using the excellent initiatives from this Government on match funding and helping local councils keep council tax down, but the money that we had saved and that we wanted to put to good use for the residents of Basingstoke and Deane in north Hampshire could not be used because of state aid rules. So we must tackle these things and we must deliver those solutions for local people.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the important points he is making about the combination of local government and local IT companies. We have a similar situation in west Oxfordshire, where we have a number of excellent companies. Does he agree that through good local governance and providing freedom for local companies, with sensibly managed local finance, we can find the solution to the internet shortages—the notspots we have been talking about?

Mr Jayawardena: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. He is right: this is all part of the competitive nature that we need to try to ensure is supported. We need to provide local solutions to local problems. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure you are aware that Hampshire County Council has been working to go beyond 96% connectivity—[*Interruption.*] If you were not aware before, you are now. That could be met if we allowed local firms to meet that 4% shortfall. If we allowed local firms to bid for further funding from the state, unhindered by EU state aid rules—indeed, instead, further supported by these business rates initiatives—we would close that 4% gap without a shadow of a doubt.

Let me turn from BT, which has had a great benefit from the current business rate arrangements, to Virgin Media, which should benefit from this. I outlined that earlier, but it is important to talk a little more about it to outline the importance of the issue to a British company based in my constituency; it has its corporate headquarters in Hook. It has run a competition, through its own commercial judgment, to supercharge local communities. Although the company has not yet supercharged Hook, which is where it is based—I hope it is listening and will do so shortly—it has agreed to supercharge Hartley Wintney and Phoenix Green, just down the road. That means that those places will have

ultrafast fibre to the premises very shortly, which is good news because residents there will get a head start on what the Government aspire for the whole of the country to receive. Those residents will receive fibre to the premises, which means they will be eligible to get the 1 gigabit per second telecommunications connectivity that is critical for the future.

Businesses will benefit as well—this is not confined to households. In Yateley in my constituency, Samsung has its European quality control centre. If we want those technical businesses to be based in constituencies such as mine, we need to ensure they have the connectivity to match. Samsung being the technical giant that it is, it needs that more than perhaps anyone else. It is therefore brilliant news to hear that these business rates initiatives will be introduced.

This is not just about the giants; it is also about the smaller businesses. Fleet, the biggest town in my constituency, has a business called CV-Library. It was set up in 2000, in the dotcom boom era. Although that was a very different internet era, that remains an internet business and it is very successful. It was set up by a young carpet fitter who was looking for work and it is now the UK’s third biggest jobs board. Of course it has thrived on the great number of new jobs created under the economic management of this Government, and it is one of the top 500 most visited websites in the UK. So we are talking about a well-reputed website.

That small business has come a long way, with Resumé Library allowing it to operate in the United States, and it is now thriving as an international business. Again, as with Samsung, if we want such businesses to be based outside the main towns and cities—outside London and across the country, ensuring that we create an economy of the nations and regions, not just of London—we need connectivity that serves businesses such as CV-Library and allows them to thrive and to connect with the world, as CV-Library has done with Resumé Library and will, I am sure, do in future. Incidentally, it was the first jobs website to allow people to apply for jobs on a mobile phone. I shall come back to that important point in a moment.

One resident in Bramley told me that he found it “incredible that we are surrounded by much better services and yet it appears that we are unable to access these.”

People such as that resident from Bramley are used to going on their mobile phone and connecting to 4G, yet in their house they cannot connect to a decent fixed-broadband service. He also said:

“I have been told by BT that it is not possible to switch exchanges”

from one to another

“as this is ‘too difficult’.”

In the mobile age, when people can go about their daily business while they walk to work, it is not acceptable for something to be simply too difficult for a monopoly provider. We must do better, and the Government are.

It is important that the 100% business rates relief is focused on encouraging the full-fibre initiative and getting that to the premises. Indeed, the digital infrastructure investment fund has also been designed as an incentive. Traditionally, it has been difficult to finance digital infrastructure investment in Britain because the industry has been relatively young. The lack of certainty about future demand has made investment difficult to secure.

I hope that the digital infrastructure investment fund, along with business rates initiatives such as the one in the Bill, will ignite interest, so that private finance will invest in this important sector. Digital infrastructure is a critical part of our infrastructure, like roads and rail, so I hope that the private interest we really need will be drawn in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) mentioned, the drawing in of private finance will make the market more competitive and allow local solutions to rise up and meet local people's needs.

Full-fibre networks are so much more resilient than the traditional copper-wire networks. I referred to my constituent in Hazeley Lea who told me that the copper cabling was failing. That is a problem not only for Hazeley Lea and North East Hampshire, but for the whole country, because the internet is delivered to most homes in Britain by underground copper cables. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills referred to the green cabinets that people see springing up, and from which bushes are cut away so that they can be enabled for fibre, but the final part of the service is still delivered by copper. The wires can be degraded by distance, as has been the case for my constituents in Stratfield Saye and Hazeley Lea; indeed, the constituents in Bramley who live near Chineham have the problem of the long distance from the exchange in Bramley.

Full-fibre networks seek to run the fibre connections straight to the doors of homes or businesses. I make one plea to the Government, because there is still no capability in planning legislation and the national planning policy framework for local councils to mandate fibre to the premises, which would solve the problem referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase. They can request it, but the only requirement they can make is that there be a telephone connection to a home. I have been told that, if it is done at scale, particularly on larger developments, the cost difference is marginal, if existent at all. The Government could easily remove that difficulty for councils to mandate fibre, and it would be transformational in the new homes that the Government aspire to build throughout the whole United Kingdom.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend mentioned the fact that copper wires can be degraded by age and distance, but volume of traffic is also a problem. Does he agree that when, on a Saturday night, for example, a popular programme is on or more people want to be streaming or gaming, the whole system slows down and grinds to a halt? That is also part of the degradation process.

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that copper's capacity is insufficient for today's challenges. We must make sure that we deal with not only today's challenges but tomorrow's, so we must ensure that there is more fibre than we even need today. We do not want to end up, perhaps in five or 10 years—not a million miles away—with the fibre we install today not being good enough for the challenges of tomorrow.

In turning to the challenges of tomorrow, it is important to consider mobile communication, which is enabled by the fibre broadband that links the mobile masts. Fibre provides the connectivity, via the masts, to users who perhaps want to do their banking on their phones, as

several Members have said. Deploying mobile infrastructure remains challenging at times, particularly in remote locations or among difficult topography. It is important for us to consider the viability of such initiatives as we move from 4G to 5G, and as we do so, perhaps we could find a remedy for those communities that have not even moved to 3G or 4G. We must ensure that those initiatives are viable, so that no one is left behind. Mobile telecommunications can be an excellent way of providing mobile broadband—fast broadband—to rural communities, instead of running fibre to those rural homes. It could be that part of the solution, part of dealing with the final 4%, is to ensure that fibre is run to mobile masts, which are then accessible to those rural communities.

Reducing operating costs is critical to ensure that the potential economic viability of these sites is considered properly. I am sure that the Government will consider that in the deliberation that they will doubtless have in the time ahead. Targeted business rates relief to enable fibre cabling to be rolled out to those hard-to-reach areas would be particularly helpful in notspots that have been badly served by telecoms to date and could be much better served by telecoms in future.

It is important to prioritise sites such as railways and motorways, as mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). They demonstrated that to have connected commuters, which was the term used by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, we need fibre to be run alongside railways.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman will have to sit down for a second. We cannot both be on our feet. I have given a lot of leeway, but I do not want to get too involved in 4G, 5G, and telecommunications being passed down motorways and railways, as they have absolutely nothing to do with what we are discussing. I know that you have been asked to filibuster, but do not worry because we have so many more speakers to come and you might deprive them. Come on, Mr Jayawardena.

Mr Jayawardena: Mr Deputy Speaker, filibuster never. I am informing the nation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, but it has got to be on the subject that we are discussing. We will be talking about cricket next. Come on.

Mr Jayawardena: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Mr Deputy Speaker suggests that this is a filibuster. My hon. Friend has hardly cleared his throat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The worry is that I have heard too much already.

Mr Jayawardena: Mr Deputy Speaker, you are very, very kind, but I shall be bringing my remarks to a close very shortly.

It is important to recognise that new fibre, which will be rolled out under business rates relief, allows for better mobile connectivity in those hard-to-reach areas.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point on the topic of infrastructure around railways and roads. Does he agree that airports are important and need infrastructure as well?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have a good suggestion for the House: I think you should put in for an Adjournment debate on that very subject. With two Members, I am sure that you can do the subject justice.

Mr Jayawardena: Mr Deputy Speaker, as ever, you make an excellent suggestion. I will speak to the hon. Gentleman in due course.

As we allow fibre to be rolled out, using this relief, to areas that have not been accessible in the past, it is important to reflect on the way in which people are changing their behaviour. People are moving to mobile. We need to ensure that accessibility to the mobile network—the fibre network—is possible. That is why it is critical that we work with companies such as Network Rail to roll out fibre on its land as well as across other people's land.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills said, all of this is in stark contrast to the way in which we used to work. It is important that people are helped along this journey. If we want to roll out more fibre, we need to ensure that there is proven demand for it, otherwise it is simply not commercially viable. We need to reduce the operating costs, which we are doing through business rates relief for the roll-out of new fibre. It is good to see the new digital training opportunities that have been created as part of the digital strategy. The new digital skills partnership is seeing Government, business, charities and voluntary organisations come together, which is really positive news. I should declare an interest, so I refer Members to the Register of Members' Financial Interests. A plan by Lloyds Banking Group to give face-to-face digital skills training to 2.5 million people, charities and small businesses by 2020 is a good example of that partnership. Google has pledged to provide five hours of digital skills as part of its commitment, too. The idea has been adopted by business.

The strategy and these plans demonstrate that the Government take businesses and people seriously in rolling out fibre broadband across the country. This is part of the cuts to business rates that benefit all rate payers and will be worth almost £9 billion over the next five years, and it is part of the Government's focus on ensuring that we create an economy that serves the whole country—all the nations and regions. It is about ensuring that the Government are committed to the long-term reform of this country.

Who would have thought that Alibaba and Amazon would be the big retailers of today, not the greengrocer on the high street? Who would have thought that we would have been speaking to people across the world on FaceTime instead of flying across the world to see them? Who would have thought that people would be able to watch this speech on their mobile phone rather than read it, dare I say, in *Hansard*? I am sure that many will.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have a slight problem. I did not expect to have to bring in a time limit—*[Interruption.]* Seriously. I do not want

to have to introduce a time limit, but we have the summing up in about an hour and there are still five speakers to come, so can we aim at around 12 minutes? If this continues, two speakers will drop off the end, and I certainly would not want that to happen when Members have been sitting here all day. I want to help Members.

8.41 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The words will ring in my ears: filibuster never, inform the nation always. That is a lesson for us all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I will give you an extra lesson—*[Interruption.]* You will have to take your seat for a second, though. You might be informing the nation, but it has to be on the subject we are discussing, otherwise you are out of order.

Bim Afolami: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much for that kind reminder.

This Bill matters. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), the former Minister, mentioned, it is not necessarily the most thrilling Bill. It is relatively short, with six clauses; as a former lawyer, I can appreciate that brevity is often harder than writing something very long, so I admire the draftsmen's ability in putting together something so succinct. The Bill should have strong support not just from the Government but from all parties, as has already been suggested by Opposition speakers.

My constituents in Hitchin and Harpenden, only 30 to 40 miles from central London, face patchy broadband coverage in many areas. I appreciate the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage—it is often harder to get broadband in spread out villages and rural areas than in tower blocks and urban areas. It is physically harder; I appreciate that, but the village of Kimpton, slap-bang in the middle of my constituency, has pretty terrible broadband.

Let me give the House some statistics to back my point up. In Kimpton, no residence or business receives superfast broadband. We are in the bottom 7% in the country for average download speed and in the bottom 0.5% for connections of more than 30 megabits per second. There is still a job to do and, with due deference as a new Member of the House, I say to the Government that we still have a job to do connecting up rural areas in our country. We should not forget that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, my 92-year-old aunt lives in Kimpton, and he is speaking eloquently on her behalf. Does he agree that it is most important, particularly in rural areas, that older people living in the community should have access that keeps them engaged with their friends and family?

Bim Afolami: I agree. It is important for people to be connected to friends and family; the converse situation is one of loneliness in many respects. We live in a society that is increasingly atomised, so it is helpful to ensure that older members of society have full digital connectivity. That is another reason why the Bill is important.

At a recent meeting of a local business club in my constituency, a business owner whose business is situated in a rural area just north of Harpenden told me that it takes three days to back up her server, such is the slow download speed. Business rates relief for the installation of full-fibre broadband infrastructure will provide a huge incentive for operators to invest in the broadband network with the latest technology—a point made admirably by several of my hon. Friends, not least my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena).

It is important to consider why, in the broader sense, it is important to have world-leading digital infrastructure. Why are we all here? I shall offer a few observations. We are effectively going through a new industrial revolution. Technology, powered largely by the internet, is driving a global future. This country needs to be at the heart of that, and rolling out full-fibre broadband is central to the challenge. The Bill will make it easier, enabling small businesses in rural areas such as mine to access the superfast broadband they need. As the Minister said, the Bill will break down barriers to business, which everybody wants—at least on our side of the House.

The Bill shows that the Government can, in limited ways and when the time is right, provide innovative solutions to help to solve some of the biggest problems choking up areas of the economy. We need strongly to support the free market and free enterprise with little Government intervention, unless necessary. The Bill and the Government's actions are bold. We need to be bold enough to use the tools of government to allow the private sector to work more efficiently and incentivise it to provide better results for our constituents, who send us to this place on their behalf, after all.

Business rates relief is welcome, as many hon. Members have said, but I urge the Government to ensure that we do not lose sight of our manifesto commitment to a full review of business rates, and to produce a system that is more fit for purpose. In certain ways, the current system has shown itself to be capricious, cumbersome and, in some senses, frankly unfair.

When discussing a Bill on digital infrastructure, it is appropriate to point out the fundamental asymmetry and unfairness for bricks-and-mortar businesses paying the levy in comparison to the digital technology-based businesses with which they often compete on a day-to-day basis. We all know businesses on our high streets that have this problem. It is important for the House to recognise that many international taxation treaties inhibit the United Kingdom from taking unilateral action on the taxation of global technology businesses because their nature is, indeed, global rather than domestic. Everybody can appreciate the difficulties with that. I urge the Government to look for more international agreement on the issue so that we can start to address the balance of the business rates paid by physical, bricks-and-mortar businesses compared with those paid by their digital cousins and friends.

In staying true to the detail and narrow nature of the Bill, it is incumbent on me briefly to talk about 5G mobile broadband, following on from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire. Now, this may seem like a dull topic, but I assure Members that it is not—it can be very dull. The reason is that 5G, like 4G or 3G, is something we take for granted; it is just there. We do not think enough about where it comes

from or the work that goes into it. However, 5G will be the enabler for so much technological development in this country.

O2 estimated in a report that 5G infrastructure will be just as pivotal as broadband to the wider economy over the next five to 10 years and will greatly boost British productivity, which all Members of this House should wish to see. The benefits are manifold, from telecare health apps, to smarter cities, to more seamless public services. Those are some of the many benefits that 5G mobile broadband can help to bring about, and I urge Members to support the Bill, which provides some of the digital plumbing that will enable us to bring tangible benefits to our constituents.

To take up a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire about 3G and 4G, it is important to note that some areas, especially rural areas, are still not on 3G or 4G—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Bim Afolami: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am coming to a conclusion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, it is not that. I am trying to be helpful. I am bothered about time. I would like us to discuss broadband infrastructure to houses, rather than 3G, 4G and 5G, which is mobile phones. If we were having a debate on mobile telecommunications, it would be brilliant, but we are not. I have allowed a bit of freedom, but I do not want the debate to concentrate on that issue. The hon. Member for North East Hampshire should know better than to lead you on into discussing something I have told him off for.

Michael Tomlinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Forgive me, but this is my very first point of order, and I am sure you will indulge me as a relatively new Member of Parliament. However, in clause 1, there is reference to mobile phone telecommunication as well as—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Don't worry—I can help you. I am very bothered about the length of time and the number of speakers I am trying to get in, so if we can concentrate on the bolts of what it is about, it will be much easier to get everybody in to speak. The last thing I want to do is not get you in to speak, seeing as you have sat here all day. So I think it is better if I can help the House move along in the area I think we need to discuss. To go back and talk about 3G over 4G is not relevant to today's debate.

Michael Tomlinson rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will make the rulings. You can listen to my rulings, and we can have a discussion later if we need to, because I want to hear you speak in a little while.

Bim Afolami: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In closing, I should say that the Bill is a significant step forward. It helps our country to lead the world in a new industrial revolution based on digital technology. It also shows that this Government, and indeed any Government using their powers effectively, can make

[*Bim Afolami*]

truly positive impacts on people's lives when acting in the right way—in this case, to enable superfast broadband to reach more people more quickly.

8.52 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the many distinguished speakers in this debate, who have made so many excellent points—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), who so eloquently laid out many of the issues that many of us face in our own constituencies.

I have a few brief points to make, but if I may I shall start with a little trip down memory lane. I have recently purchased a new iPhone. In doing so, I remembered the first iPhone I ever bought, which connected to a thing called EDGE—it did not have 3G. Of course, those days are long behind us, and with my new device, I can do a great many tasks I just could not have thought of in those days.

I say that because today is my baby son Henry's first birthday, and I apologise to him in advance, if he ever watches this speech, that I am here, rather than speaking to him. But all is not lost, because, owing to the wonderful invention of mobile phones and the internet, I can take part in the happy day. I can, for example, see him and speak to him on Skype. For his part, he wonders why on earth his father's voice is coming out of a small box my wife is holding in front of him.

I can also see photographs and videos of him opening presents. These presents were, of course, ordered from a well-known, very large internet company—and a gigantic number of them there are, too. His everyday necessities are ordered through the internet; there is no longer a requirement to go to the shop. Indeed, it is possible, although I do not have this system myself, to link up the house so that I could turn the lights up and down in his room if I wished. I could check on his welfare through a webcam that I could view on my mobile phone. The most extraordinary, and perhaps slightly disturbing, thing is that there is a teddy bear in his room—a company called CloudPets produces these—and, using an app on this iPhone, I can go online and record a message so that when he plays with the teddy bear and presses the button on it he can hear my voice. This is lovely, of course, on his first birthday.

However, the internet is not just something to amuse, and perhaps confuse or even slightly frighten, infants; it is of everyday importance for us all. As many hon. Members have rightly said, these days the internet needs to be seen, as it certainly is by the people of Witney and west Oxfordshire, as another essential utility. We all know that we are able to get about by road and by train, and that we are connected to water, electricity and, in some cases, gas. We expect those things now. Once, not so many years ago, the internet was seen as a bit of a luxury that people might want in order to go online and look at websites, but it was not something that they had to do. Now it very much is, because so many services take place online that it is increasingly hard to use them if we wish to telephone. Utility companies, for example, increasingly encourage us to go online, perhaps to pay a bill or change a tariff, rather than ring to speak to a person. It is therefore absolutely critical that everybody has immediate access to these services.

I would like, if I may, to clarify some of the terminology that we have discussed in the course of this debate. We all fall very quickly into the habit of referring to fast broadband, superfast broadband and ultrafast broadband—or full broadband, as it were. Superfast broadband—I appreciate that the House is aware of this, but it is worth dwelling on for a moment—uses fibre-optic cable to get to the cabinet but then, from cabinet to house, only copper. That is an old system that does not carry the data required these days due to attenuation—the breakdown of signal over distance and the physical effect of the current going through the copper. The signal slows down so that even if there is fibre-optic cable running to the cabinet, by the time it gets to the house the user does not necessarily receive anything like superfast coverage. That is why, although I entirely bow to the expertise of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and thank him, on behalf of constituents, for all the work that he did, there is still a job to do, as I think we would all accept. Superfast broadband is being rolled out across the entire country, but still, in some places, 5% to 10% of people do not have it, never mind anything else. We increasingly need fibre-optic cable running to the property, which enables full-speed broadband all the way.

In my professional life before I was elected, I saw exactly why that is. I know that other hon. Members will feel exactly the same. As a barrister, I would be away at court; the papers are often sent through to barristers at the last minute. They would sometimes be very big bundles, and our clerks would wish to email them to us to save us having to go into chambers to pick them up before going home. If I had been in court in, say, London, and I wanted to go to chambers in Winchester or Oxford before I went home, I would wish to avoid that step. I would have to go to my home in Bladon, a village in Oxfordshire, to look at the email to see whether the papers had been sent to me, but there was not enough broadband speed to download them, so I would have to get into the car, drive into chambers, pick up the physical bundles, and then drive back. All the while, I was wasting time, wasting money, downgrading my productivity, and adding to the traffic and pollution on the roads, all of which was unnecessary. When people write to me, as they frequently do, to say that it is impossible for them to carry out their business, I entirely understand their point, because I have suffered that very same frustration.

West Oxfordshire is full of businesses that operate from home. Before this debate, I had a look through my emails to see how many villages had written to me. Over the course of the brief time I have been a Member of Parliament, I have been contacted by constituents from the Wortons, Spelsbury, Kencot, Lechlade, Bladon, Bampton, Bruern, Filkins, Stanton Harcourt, Chastleton, New Yatt, Sandford St Martin, Fawler, Minster Lovell, Taynton, Langford and Standlake. That is 17 or 18 places in all.

I shall concentrate on the example of Chastleton. A gentleman from the parish meeting wrote to me—I am sure you will be pleased to hear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that he made his point succinctly—to say that Chastleton is lucky to get a speed of 1.5 megabits per second and that that has implications. First, businesses simply cannot work from home or find it very difficult to do so. Secondly, as I have alluded to from my own experience,

it affects traffic flow because people have to either collect items in person or go to their workplace in Oxford, thereby adding to congestion on the A40, which hon. Members will know is a subject that I mention frequently. Thirdly, on education, children who are required to do their homework online simply cannot do so in many cases.

If anything, my correspondent has missed out one of the real drawbacks of the absence of a proper broadband connection, which is its effect on elderly care. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) has referred accurately to an atomised society. When we go away to work, in many cases we leave elderly relatives without immediate access to family. It is absolutely crucial that people are able to make contact with loved ones quickly and easily, and to access the necessary services, including online medical advice and transport-booking facilities.

I remember my father going abroad on business trips. He would telephone during the week and we would wait while the signal bounced off the satellite, went around the world and came back again. We are a long way from those days. When I went to work in New Zealand some years ago, I was able to have a video conference with my loved ones at home and it was set up very quickly. That is all well and good. Those powers exist, but only if people have an adequate internet signal, which is clearly necessary for businesses, the elderly, family and care.

I know that many hon. Members represent rural areas where this issue is the chief concern. However, the situation is much the same in cities. The speeds experienced by many householders in Westminster and Lambeth are not much better than those in the rural areas we represent, so let us not think that the issue affects only those of us who have lots of small villages in our area. It affects cities as well. In fact, a lady who lives on Buttercross Lane in my biggest town, Witney, wrote to me to make a point about developers, which has also been made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), who is no longer in her place. My correspondent was frustrated that the cabinet is very close but the developers are not required to connect the rest of the properties. That issue clearly causes immense and understandable frustration for my constituent and many others.

The digital economy has contributed about 7% of national output over the past year and has grown three times faster than other areas of the economy, so it is of enormous significance to the economy, particularly in areas such as mine, where so many people work from home, are self-employed and run small businesses. I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for small and micro businesses. The issue is very close to my heart.

There have been many bank closures in Carterton. As other hon. Members have said, we are told that that is because people are increasingly using those services online. That is all well and good, provided that they have the ability to do so. Although someone in Carterton might have a strong signal—not everybody does—that is not necessarily the case in the surrounding villages. They need one if they are to pay council tax or do internet shopping.

When I was younger, if I wanted a particular book I had to order it from the local bookshop. It might be sourced from the other side of the world and take

months to arrive. Some of the romance of that has been lost, because we can now order almost anything we want and it will appear in a matter of days or, at most, weeks. That is one of the wonders of the internet age. The same is true of music. Music lovers may remember that once upon a time, if we wanted to listen to a hard-to-find song or album, it was sometimes possible to track it down, but it might have to be ordered from abroad. Now, the many well-known streaming services make it possible to listen to whatever we like immediately, as long as we have a good enough internet service.

Decent, high-speed, ultrafast broadband is absolutely crucial for day-to-day necessities and for business. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is not in his place, has given us an inkling of what is required in rural economies. In years gone by, the biggest contributor, directly and indirectly, to the economy of Witney and west Oxfordshire was something called the Cotswold Lion. The Cotswold Lion is actually a sheep, and in the not-too-distant past—only 50 or so years ago—the blankets and gloves made from its fleece were the mainstay of Witney’s economy. Now, we are looking to unlock tourism. It is essential that those who provide accommodation in bed and breakfasts, and in the great many houses that are available on short lets, can get those properties online.

On Saturday I attended the Witney carnival. At many such events all over west Oxfordshire, people sell things such as art or food products at small stalls. All such businesses are made possible and successful by access to good, fast broadband. Without it, they simply will not work. I apologise for saying it again, as I have done on many occasions in this House, but broadband is not a luxury; it is absolutely essential in this day and age. I entirely agree with west Oxfordshire residents who write to me to point out that they have a slow connection and they ought to have a fast one. They are absolutely right. It is essential in their personal lives and their businesses.

Broadband is entirely necessary for all of industry, in business premises, in home businesses and in the tourism sector. As I have said, a great deal of work has been done. I thank the Government for the work that was done before I came into Parliament and for their continuing efforts to roll out fast broadband across my constituency and beyond, but we must complete the job. I applaud the introduction of a legal right to superfast broadband. Coverage in Witney is about 90%, but we need to work towards 100%. I welcome the package of measures that the Government are introducing, which include the universal service obligation and £400 million towards the digital infrastructure investment fund.

As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), I particularly encourage private investment. I am grateful to BT for being proactive in my constituency and trying to connect as many people as possible. With sound money, good local governance, strong local councils and wise investment in flexible, agile and cost-effective local companies—there are several such companies in my constituency—we can provide this full solution.

I will briefly touch on the two clauses in the Bill that I consider to be most relevant. The first of them quite rightly puts business rates relief for broadband alongside the existing relief for small businesses, charitable

[*Robert Courts*]

organisations and rural businesses. Clause 6 promises that the effect will be more or less immediate, and I applaud that.

My final point—I do not want to test your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker—concerns 5G. I welcome the fact that broadband and mobile telephony will be combined over the coming years. As we seek to bridge the digital divide, we really must fix notspots. I applaud everything that the Government have done towards that, and I hope that the Bill will be given a Second Reading.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call Mr Tomlinson, I want to help him by saying that he might want to take a few pages out of his speech. If hon. Members keep to 10 minutes each, they will all get a chance to speak.

9.9 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your guidance and for your earlier ruling, which has given me the opportunity to speak for 10 minutes, rather than the nine, eight or seven minutes I might otherwise have had.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If it is helpful I can make the limit eight minutes to give someone else more time.

Michael Tomlinson: My meaning is the exact opposite. I am very grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (*Robert Courts*), for whom I feel great sympathy. I am sure that many of my hon. Friends as well as Opposition Members have been in a similar situation when trying to communicate with members of their family on birthdays, important anniversaries and the like. He and I, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman)—he has arrived in the Chamber at the appropriate moment to hear me say this—were members of the same chambers and therefore in exactly the same situation when trying to download papers attached to an email to make sure that they arrived in court on time.

I warmly welcome the Bill. As we have heard so many hon. Members say, the importance of broadband cannot be overstated. It is as important as road and rail, and is a vital part of our infrastructure. Although I am pleased with the progress the Government are making, I will dwell on one or two brief points about where improvements still need to be made.

I start with words of congratulation, because it is right to acknowledge where the Government are moving in the right direction, and to be able to stand up and say that 93% coverage for superfast broadband is indeed an achievement. I applaud the ambition to achieve 95% coverage by the end of 2017, and I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the Government are on target for that. However, it is frustrating for the 5% who are still left without it. That point has been repeated this evening, but I make no apologies for repeating it again. Many of us who have spoken represent constituents

who are in exactly that position, and I know that a number of my constituents are not consoled by the fact that 95% of the rest of the population have access to superfast broadband while they do not.

I need not dwell on specific internet speeds; suffice it to say that the 1,000 megabits per second lauded in relation to the Bill is to be warmly welcomed, but that figure would be staggering to my many constituents who are struggling with 0.5 to 1 megabit per second and really cannot imagine a speed as vast as 1,000 megabits per second. However, I will, if I may, dwell on two or three brief constituency examples that constituents have raised with me. I must declare an interest in that, in the village of Lytchett Matravers, I am affected by many of the same issues.

The first example involves a constituent who wrote to me expressing great concern about broadband speeds of between 0.5 and 1 megabit per second. As has been said, we use the internet for more and more things these days, including education. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) mentioned researching points for educational purposes, but it goes further than that because many of our children are asked to do homework based on the internet and purely on the internet; in fact, they have to access the internet to download the homework to do that evening. One constituent wrote to me saying that they have to ration the amount of homework that their family can do, with the children taking it in turns to get on to the computer and complete their homework, because speeds of 0.5 to 1 megabit per second simply do not allow two children to do their homework at one and the same time. The additional point was made that updating software—with Microsoft, people do not get a wonderful DVD or disc to put into the computer these days; they actually have to download it from the internet—simply cannot be done if the speeds are not fast enough.

The second example I was recently given by a constituent involves a rural business. Again, the constituent lives about 100 metres from a different network that is much faster and would allow the business to function properly. As it is, he is struggling on less than 1 megabit per second and has to go to his place of work to download his work. The speeds where he lives simply will not allow it. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) mentioned an example in his constituency in which BT was flexible, but in this case BT has not been flexible enough and will not allow my constituent to change from one exchange to another, despite the distance of merely 50 metres or so.

I am conscious of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I want to make one or two final points about postcodes, if I may. I know that the Minister is soon to jump up to the Dispatch Box, but I want him to take this point on board. Quite often the data are arranged by postcode and the percentages are calculated on that basis. However, some roads have the same postcode but different exchanges. I can think of one example in Dorset where it is claimed people have the potential to access superfast broadband on the basis of the postcode alone, but that is not the case because the one postcode has two separate exchanges.

I warmly welcome the measures in the Bill. It will not solve all the problems overnight. When my constituents look at the full-fibre speeds, with fibre to the door rather than just to the cabinet, of course they applaud them, but they want them and they want them soon.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for indulging me and for giving me a full 10 minutes, and I sit down in advance of reaching those 10 minutes.

9.16 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak for longer.

It is a pleasure to speak on this Bill tonight, because when I campaigned in the by-election back in December broadband was one of the major issues. Indeed, trying to deliver broadband throughout my constituency is part of the five-point plan on which many hon. Friends helped me campaign back in those winter months.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) that broadband is essential. That is a relatively new thing. I am not that old, but when I look back to my childhood, I remember there being one BBC computer in a corner of the school that we went to use a class at a time. Only when I got to university did we really start to use the internet and have the ability to send emails. At that stage, we were sending emails only to other people within the university—in my case mostly to the man who is now my husband.

Now, we cannot conceive of how we could possibly live without the internet, whether we are young or old. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) said, people need it to be able to do homework. The children of my constituents and my own children have been given homework on Sumdog and other maths applications that they are supposed to do online, but they simply cannot do it with broadband speeds of less than 2 megabits per second. That is affecting the educational opportunities of the children in our most rural constituencies.

Young people in general are having difficulties. When they turn on the television and turn on Sky broadband, for example, they are told they can watch downloads, TV on demand or downloaded films, but they cannot because those things are not available to people who live in many of the rural areas I represent, where download speeds of less than 2 megabits per second are very common.

It is perhaps for business people that the lack of broadband represents the greatest problem. It is a particular problem for small businesses and, in rural areas, for farmers, who have to complete their single farm payments online. Reloading and reloading and reloading that page becomes very wearisome. We are now being asked to complete tax returns online—in fact, we will be asked to do so four times a year. VAT returns are also done online. All this becomes more and more wearisome when we have to do it online and we simply cannot do it. When businesses want to advertise for new employees they do it online and when people apply for those jobs they do it online. All those things cannot be achieved because we do not have access to what is now, in effect, a utility. In many parts of my constituency, it is not possible for families to do their shopping online. They write to me complaining, “We live in the most rural area in the country, and we cannot order our shopping.”

This is, perhaps, of even greater concern to the elderly. Jo Cox founded the Commission on Loneliness to help people in our community, such as the elderly, who are cut off from society. That may be more prevalent in

rural communities than it is in cities. The internet offers elderly people living in such communities the opportunity to be connected to their families through Skype and other methods of communication. It also offers opportunities for telemedicine. At a time when we face challenges in relation to social care and the elderly, telemedicine and the use of the internet to monitor the condition of and check on the wellbeing of an elderly person can enable us to improve our social care offering to people in rural communities, and communities everywhere; but if we do not have the necessary internet resources, we cannot do that.

I welcome the Government’s 93% superfast broadband coverage—we have made great strides in increasing the number of people who have access to this wonder—but for those who do not have access to it, the position has become increasingly frustrating. Some people living in Wellingore wrote to me saying, “We can see the cabinet, but we do not have access to it, because we are on a different exchange, and by the time the signal reaches us from that cabinet, it is so slow as to be virtually useless.” Those people are being supported through the community fibre partnership, and I hope that in time they will be able to benefit from good broadband. The situation is similar in Swaton. A constituent wrote to me saying that they were full of excitement at the sight of the superfast broadband sign with the little box in the corner. It is right outside their house, but they are not connected to it; they are connected to one down the road.

People in Sudbrook—here I must declare an interest, in that Sudbrook happens to be the nearest village to where I live—were originally told that they would have broadband by this September. Unfortunately, however, they have now been told that that will not necessarily happen because of the railway line, although the railway line is not new but has been there for a long time. Their broadband seems to have been indefinitely postponed. It beggars belief that in this day and age something as simple as a branch line should prevent the upgrade of a broadband network.

Overall, I think that the Bill, which will abolish business rates on fibre broadband for five years, will encourage the placement of new fibre lines, and I hope very much that that will happen in the rural components of my constituency. I hope that, in focusing this benefit, the Minister is minded to ensure that providing broadband for people in rural communities who are currently suffering from a lack of access to that vital utility is given a higher priority than increasing broadband speeds from very, very fast to even faster in our cities and town centres.

9.23 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to be the last Back Bencher to be called in the debate, which has been incredibly interesting, although I think that, at times, the connection between the clauses in the Bill and the contents of speeches was well and truly lost. There was a suggestion that constituents of ours would have been able to watch the debate online. If that is the case, given certain parts of it, I find myself feeling sympathy for the 93% of the public who have such access. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), who is no longer present, said that innovation would permit constituents

[Huw Merriman]

to watch the entirety of his speech online. Conservative Members speculated on whether that same innovation would allow the battery in his phone to last quite as long. Perhaps there is still some way to go.

None the less, this has been an interesting debate, and I am delighted to be able to use the last few minutes to further it. Despite great work by my local authority, East Sussex County Council, and indeed by the Government, too many of my constituents do not have a connection to fast broadband. My constituents' age profile is high, and in order to balance our local economy we must encourage more working-age people to come to live and work in East Sussex. It is not too far from London, but, from a commuting perspective, particularly given our travails with Southern rail, it is too far to be attractive to many such younger working-age people. My constituency is fortunate in that 75% of it is designated as an area of outstanding beauty, so in that sense it draws people to want to come there to set up their own businesses, but they will not do so without the connectivity of superfast broadband.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend describes a constituency that is different from mine, but in many ways we have similar issues. In Gloucester, we struggle with the black spots that often arise in urban environments. Most of the city is well-covered but there are certain black spots where people cannot access broadband that enables them to work from home. That is similar to the problem that he describes.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is right: urban areas, as well as rural ones, will not continue to regenerate without this problem being fixed.

I welcome the introduction of the Bill and the granting of business rate relief as a result for a five-year period on fibre and 5G installations. That should act as the further incentive that we in my constituency need to provide a fix.

I also welcome the previous Bill's introduction of the new universal service obligation, which, again, should give the last 7% faster broadband. As has been said, this type of connectivity infrastructure is, in the modern age, akin for our constituents to the delivery of a new road or railway in the past. It is vital for the entire economy that we do not leave these constituents behind.

As well as recognising the investment from the Government via this Bill, and previous funding initiatives, I commend Conservative-run East Sussex County Council and Labour-run Brighton and Hove Borough Council for working together to help businesses and properties across East Sussex to access faster broadband. Through their e-Sussex project, my county has allocated £34 million in funding for areas that are too expensive for the market to upgrade itself. Every exchange in East Sussex will be included, and the current project will cover an area of 660 square miles and over 66,500 premises. It will install over 400 new fibre telecoms cabinets and other structures and will lay over 1,000 km of fibre—the distance between Brighton and Berlin.

The first e-Sussex contract is achieving excellent results in bringing better, more reliable fibre broadband to many areas that would not otherwise benefit from upgraded services. However, there remain properties that are hard

to reach—for example, where a property is too far from the upgraded cabinet to benefit from any speed uplift. “Hard to reach” generally means too expensive for the public purse to fund. East Sussex has therefore signed a second contract with BT for further investment, so that an additional 5,000 homes and businesses in East Sussex will be able to access high-speed fibre broadband.

There has been much talk today of political parties coming together over a common interest. Perhaps that local example is a positive illustration of the power of working together.

Richard Graham: Have my hon. Friend's council and the council in Brighton introduced in their planning requirements an absolute requirement on all developers to provide superfast broadband? This is an area where many of our councils around the country could do more, and I would be interested to learn of his experience.

Huw Merriman: I do not believe those councils have, but my hon. Friend touches on another issue. I am referring to East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove Borough Council, but outside of Brighton but within East Sussex it is the district councils that would have the planning condition powers to which he refers. Therefore, I doubt that those councils have done so, but this is perhaps a good example of where districts can work better together with their county cousins.

This might seem like great news for East Sussex, but I am afraid we are starting from a very low base in terms of where we are operating from. The recent report by the consumer organisation Which? found that Rother District Council's geographical area, which covers the bulk of the 200 square miles of my constituency, is in the bottom 10 of all districts and boroughs in the entire British Isles for average broadband speeds. Rother joins the highlands, the Shetlands and the Orkney Isles in the bottom 10 performing areas. In contrast, the residents of Tamworth, which tops the list for speeds with an average of 30 megabits per second, are much more fortunate. The average speed for Rother is less than 10 megabits per second.

Bearing in mind that 10 megabits per second is deemed to be the minimum acceptable standard by Ofcom, I very much welcome the Minister's commitment that 100% of my constituents will receive 10 megabits per second by 2020. The Which? report suggests that the increased performance for the Rother District Council area will be vital if the Government are to meet their 100% target. May I therefore put in a blatant invitation to the Minister to meet me to discuss what help could be offered to my constituents in Rother, in addition to the provisions in the Bill and the universal service obligation, to enable me to assist the Government in meeting their target?

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill as part of a package of proactive measures from this Government to deliver faster broadband. I should also mention—notwithstanding the fact that I just said, “in conclusion”—that I welcome the further reforms to the business rate mechanism. I do not wish to wander too far from the topic, but I can think of many examples of business rates having an impact on businesses in which services are being offered. We should not forget, for example, that Members of Parliament are subject to business rates, as I found out to my personal cost when I exceeded my IPSA budget

for my staff office. I therefore absolutely welcome the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) that business rates should be linked to turnover, rather than to premises. That would certainly help my constituency. As a further meander, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: I am much enjoying the hon. Gentleman's dilation. There is no prohibition on him dilating a little further if he is minded to do so. He clearly has an expectant audience.

Huw Merriman: You are very kind, Mr Speaker. That is helpful, although I think part of what you said was perhaps inaccurate.

The other point I wanted to mention was corporation tax. I hope Opposition Members will agree that my speech has been quite collaborative so far, but I take issue with some of them on this issue. Conservative Members have pointed out that corporation tax has been reduced, yet the overall yield—the amount that can be put into public services—has increased. For whatever reason, the Opposition want to increase corporation taxes, which would reduce the amount of money available for public services. That is of course illogical.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Huw Merriman: I will of course give way to a man who is anything but illogical.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Has he not once again powerfully shown the benefits of the Laffer curve, which demonstrates that lower rates lead to more tax revenue?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding me of the Laffer curve, a term I have not heard since I was doing A-levels at Aylesbury College, where I was studying economics. He is absolutely right.

That brings me to another point about the Opposition. As well as supporting the Bill, it is important to support its aims, which are to increase business, to increase turnover and to increase the amount of money that we can put into public services. I am reminded of a recent visit to Bexhill business park, where the Government are creating funds for a new road. In return, it is hoped that investment will be generated for new businesses to set up there. It is interesting that many businesses from across Europe are looking to set up their headquarters in that business park. At a time when business confidence is perhaps a little uncertain owing to our position with regard to the European Union, it is absolutely essential to ensure that we have the lowest possible corporation tax base, so that those businesses can have every incentive to invest in this country, not just for the short term but for the long term. I am sure that they will be absolutely delighted that this Government have been returned to deliver just that.

In conclusion to my conclusion, I very much welcome the steps that this Government have taken to incentivise further broadband roll-out. I hope that they will help my constituents in Rother, which is, as I have said, in the bottom 10 districts—*[Interruption.]* I repeated that in

case Scottish National party Members did not hear it the first time. I very much look forward to supporting the Bill as it spends its many days in Committee.

9.34 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Opposition welcome this Bill. It is vital that our homes and businesses have access to broadband and that broadband is faster, safer and more reliable than before, which is why we will be carefully scrutinising the Bill in Committee. As the Chancellor put it, this country was late to the 4G party, so we should do all we can to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of 5G communications and has full-fibre broadband to support it.

There was some doubt that this Bill would appear. The policy was originally announced in the Chancellor's 2016 autumn statement and was due to be implemented as part of the Local Government Finance Bill, but it was then scuppered by the general election—like a lot of things. It was not mentioned in the Queen's Speech, and there was some industry nervousness that it had been abandoned, but here we are in early July with a stand-alone Bill and I am glad that we are.

As we have heard, the Bill has a simple premise—at least I thought it was simple before I attended the start of this debate five hours ago. It will encourage firms to install new optical fibre by providing 100% business rates relief backdated to last April for a minimum period of five years. We understand that it will cost the Exchequer around £65 million by 2022. That is sure to be welcome news to the UK's broadband companies, many of whom wrote to the Chancellor last February to complain that the current business rates regime is not fit for purpose and discourages inward investment in upgrades.

This legislation meets some of those concerns. The fact is that those business leaders were really talking about the whole business rates regime. This Bill deals with just one aspect when we actually need to be talking about the whole system, which many hon. Members from across the House have agreed with. There are many other changes to the system that could help to support businesses, and we outlined some of them in our manifesto, including switching from RPI to CPI indexation, exempting new investment in plant and machinery and ensuring that businesses have access to a proper appeals process. I appreciate that this is a stand-alone bill dealing with digital infrastructure, but I fear that it is no more than a sticking plaster for our moribund business rates system when we really need a total rethink.

This is a framework Bill, so it is short on detail. Conditions of eligibility will be outlined in future regulations, for example, which is why we need to scrutinise the Bill carefully. I do wonder which firms will benefit. The relief is expected to boost the big data providers through, for example, Virgin Media's £3 billion "project lightning" and BT's Openreach subsidiary, but it is unclear whether smaller firms will benefit initially. What impact does the Minister expect the reform to have on smaller providers? It would be a great shame if this Bill was merely for big business. Would it help smaller firms if the Bill's provisions could be applied retrospectively to capture work on full-fibre networks that has already taken place?

[*Yvonne Fovargue*]

Like many hon. Members, I am worried about how the Bill will benefit Britain's rural communities, who have not done quite so well out of the broadband revolution so far. Many areas of the country, including urban areas, have been dogged by poor connectivity. I could not get broadband speeds for the past seven years in my area, but we were connected just last week because the housing company that built my house did not allow it to be cabled. However, many customers still do not get the advertised speeds that they are paying for. If they want a broadband upgrade, they pay for it, but they do not always receive what is advertised, so I commend the *Which?* report on broadband speeds. We pay our water rates, but if the utility company merely gave us a trickle out of the tap, we would be quick to complain. Many Members have said that broadband is the next utility, so why is that not included?

Businesses have suffered from not having the proper access to markets and customers that they should have. The public have suffered from being cut off from internet sites and entertainment sources, and their children are doubly penalised because so much modern education relies on online resources.

Discussion of digital exclusion has been sadly lacking in this debate. Services are increasingly going online. In fact, jobcentres have recently closed as people are encouraged to apply online for all their benefits and council services, yet many people do not have access. In my constituency in the borough of Wigan, 99% of people have access to fast broadband, but only 74% of them have the skills to use it. The cuts in the adult education budget are particularly penalising those people by preventing them from joining the digital economy that we all enjoy.

As I said at the outset, we support the Bill, which is an important step towards securing better broadband connectivity and access, but it is about more than just access. The Bill can work only if it is part of a broader picture that, on the one hand, fully incentivises business to invest in the future and, on the other, ensures that everyone, not just a select few, benefits from the reforms. More than just this Bill, that means education to ensure that everyone has the skills to take advantage of this great step forward.

9.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): We have had an interesting and, at times, wide-ranging debate on this important Bill. It is good to see such interest from Government Back Benchers, but it is slightly disappointing not to hear one speech from an Opposition Back Bencher on such a critical issue across the country.

The improvement of connectivity in the digital age helps individuals in their workplaces and homes, and can transform public services and the economy. Improved connectivity will bring significant economic rewards, with research suggesting that increased broadband speeds alone could add £17 billion to UK output by 2024, which has been recognised by all Members who have spoken today. I thank the many colleagues who made such passionate contributions today, which show that we all recognise the importance of investing in our telecommunications infrastructure.

The Bill will ensure that we help to close the digital divide and get higher quality, more reliable and resilient connectivity to more households and businesses. The Bill makes the technical changes needed to introduce 100% business rates relief for five years for newly installed fibre infrastructure. The importance we place on that relief is shown by how quickly we have introduced the Bill in the Session.

The Chancellor announced at autumn statement 2016 that we would provide relief on new fibre with effect from 1 April 2017. It is therefore vital that we move quickly to reassure the sector that the relief will follow. Investment decisions have been made on the back of the Chancellor's commitment, and it is right that we proceed with the Bill to give us the powers to deliver the promised relief.

The Bill introduces support that forms part of a wider £1 billion package of measures that the Government are putting in place to support investment in digital infrastructure, and it forms an important part of the Government's digital strategy. As such, the Bill will help to maintain the UK's current high ranking as an internet e-commerce economy, as well as providing significant coverage of quick, reliable broadband connections to homes across the country.

I want to mention some of the contributions made in this debate, starting with that of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). He welcomed the Bill and also made the economic case for it. I felt he acknowledged that this Government are investing in the technology of the future. He intimated that the measures in the Bill will favour larger providers, but let me reassure him that, on the contrary, the Bill actually helps the smaller providers and opens up competition. It puts those smaller providers on a more level playing field, and that view was reiterated in several contributions.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned business rate retention, and we are absolutely clear that we want local government to keep more of the taxes that it raises locally. That commitment was in our manifesto and we are looking to follow through on it.

Andrew Gwynne: This is an important point, which I have raised in points of order and through other mechanisms in the past week or so. Will the Minister clarify that it is still the Government's intention to proceed with the measures that were in the Local Government Finance Bill relating to the local retention of business rates, on the same timetable set out, with the changes to the revenue support grant?

Mr Jones: As I said to the hon. Gentleman in my response to his comments, this Government are absolutely committed to allowing local government to keep more of the taxes it raises locally. That was in our manifesto. He made a very important point, not just then, but during his contribution, about local government wanting certainty, but he was using a little faux rage, given that during the time his party was in government, local government had no more than one year of certainty on how it would be funded. Local government currently has a four-year settlement and therefore greater certainty. That said, we are well aware that in the last year of that settlement we need to provide certainty to local government, and it is our intention to do just that.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned more regular revaluations. I can—

Andrew Gwynne rose—

Mr Jones: I am not going to give way; I am going to make some progress. On regular revaluations, I just want to tell the hon. Gentleman that we are committed to the aim of delivering more frequent revaluations. The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) also made the important point about the detail of the measures in the Bill. As she knows, this is a framework and we are going to introduce further regulations to implement the Bill. I can assure her that those regulations will be put forward before the Committee stage, so that hon. Members can scrutinise them during the passage of the Bill.

Andrew Gwynne: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have stood at this Dispatch Box on a number of occasions in the past week or so to discuss this important issue; I have asked you how we can get a statement from the Secretary of State or his Ministers. The last time, the Secretary of State did say that we could raise this in a debate. I have asked the question and we have still not got answers. How do we get that certainty for local government?

Mr Speaker: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that if he does not at first succeed, he must try, try again. I am sure that is something his mother taught him when he was at school—when he was a young boy growing up. What I would say to him is, “Persist. Go to the Table Office. Think of the opportunities for different types of questions and, as we approach the summer recess, the relative urgency or emergency of what he seeks.”

Mr Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Let me move on to contributions made by other right hon. and hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) showed his significant knowledge in this area. He welcomed the Bill and, given that significant knowledge, it was good to see him confirm that he thought the Bill would help to incentivise the smaller providers and increase competition in the sector, a point reiterated by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage also mentioned the impact the Bill would have on our mobile infrastructure and 5G, as well as the need to look at the planning system to ensure that we have the mobile infrastructure we need. I am sure he will be aware that provisions were introduced last November as part of the Digital Economy Act 2017 to speed up the planning process for telecom infrastructure.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) welcomed the framework for England and Wales. As he acknowledged, the Bill's framework will allow the devolved Government to take up—or not, as the case may be—the measures. He was right to point out that funding will be provided for Wales through Barnett consequentials.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) made an important point about the potential loss of income for local authorities during the Bill's implementation. I can reassure him that if a network is

on the local rating list, compensation for local government will be provided via a grant to cover the particular local authority's share of the cost of providing the business rate relief.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire welcomed the Bill, which I understand fulfils a wish he had during the passage of the 2017 Act. He seemed extremely pleased that the Government have taken up the suggestion to provide this business rate relief.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) discussed the Bill's importance in the context of social inclusion and the tackling of loneliness. She referred to rural small businesses that would benefit from the delivery of fibre broadband to their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) recognised that the five-year rate relief period would provide a significant incentive to fibre broadband. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), she made the perceptive comment that this type of fibre broadband is becoming as important a part of the nation's infrastructure as our road and rail network.

My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) made an important contribution. He has campaigned tirelessly on this issue and talked about the benefit for the Government, with our investment being returned many times over because of the increased economic activity that will be created.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) talked about the importance of having fibre connectivity on new housing estates, citing Chasewater Grange. She also mentioned the opportunity that the fibre roll-out could provide to new industrial developments, and did not forgo the opportunity to mention the Rugeley B power station site, which is extremely important to her and her constituents.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire welcomed the Bill and mentioned how, in rural areas such as his, its provisions could well assist with tech jobs that hitherto may not have been deliverable in rural areas.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The Minister mentions rural areas; could he reference my constituency, Wealden? Broadband is imperative there, not only for the farmers who need to log their files and the teachers who need to do their Ofsted reports, but for the many business throughout the constituency's three towns, Uckfield, Crowborough and Hailsham. We need connectivity in rural areas, and I hope the Minister can comment on that.

Mr Marcus Jones: I concur with my hon. Friend. My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) made the same comments in regard to how these types of measures will help those in her constituency engaged in the agricultural industry and farming.

In conclusion, this Bill will help businesses and households with their broadband and support the economy. It is only one of several measures—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the Minister is very flattered. The House cannot wait to hear more of the oratory.

Mr Marcus Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

[*Mr Marcus Jones*]

This is one of several measures that we are taking on both broadband and business rates and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (RELIEF FROM NON-DOMESTIC RATES) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill:

Committee

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall be taken in the following order: Clauses 1 to 4; the Schedule; Clauses 5 and 6; new Clauses; new Schedules; remaining proceedings on the Bill.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(3) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(4) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(5) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(6) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (RELIEF FROM NON-DOMESTIC RATES) BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Order. If, inexplicably, some Members do not wish to hear the debate on the future of the King George Hospital in Ilford, I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, so that we can hear the oration from the constituency Member of Parliament, and his neighbour, to whom the matter is of great importance.

King George Hospital, Ilford

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

9.56 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to be called before 10 o'clock. I wish to begin by saying that, earlier this evening, I was at a celebration function organised by the Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust celebrating the fact that, in March, after three years, it came out of special measures. That event was a very good occasion, because it enabled me to get even more up-to-date information before this debate. The trust has published 10 tips on how to climb out of special measures. I am sure that other NHS trusts will find that valuable. It has also published the booklet “The Only Way is Up”, which is original, and it details the strenuous efforts made by all the staff and the management and various people with whom they were engaged in order to achieve that great progress.

I must say that, in my 25 years in this House, I have often had to bring to the attention of the House and the Government problems in the NHS in my area. It is not the first time that I have talked about the future of King George Hospital. Although the hospital, which is one of the two—with Queen’s Hospital, Romford—in our trust, is now improving and is under the best management that it has had in 25 years, there are still clouds on the horizon. First, there is, inexplicably, a delay in an announcement about the future of the North East London NHS Treatment Centre where I understand there is some difference of opinion between local clinical commissioning groups. I must declare an interest here: I had an operation on my nose in that facility a few years ago and found it to be very good. There is a very strong argument that that facility could be brought in-house within the NHS, and no longer provided by Care UK. That would allow greater flexibility onsite for longer planning of what might happen at King George Hospital.

Secondly—I referred to clouds on the horizon—there is the ongoing social care crisis, which has impacted very much in my local authority and neighbouring local authorities, linked to the 40% cuts in funding for Redbridge local authority, an ageing population on the one hand and—

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Mike Gapes: The ongoing social care crisis poses major difficulties. We all know that private care homes are struggling and that there is an issue of quality. It seems to me that one advantage of the King George Hospital site is that it is co-located next door to the facilities of the North East London NHS Foundation Trust’s Goodmayes Hospital and various other facilities that provide support for people with learning difficulties and people with acute, severe and less severe mental health problems. It would seem logical, if we are to have joined-up NHS treatment, to have alongside a hospital facilities for those who need short-term, temporary or longer-term care in transition to or from the NHS facilities next door. The site is big enough to do that and, with imagination, could be a model to be followed.

We also have a third cloud on the horizon, which is the north-east London draft sustainability and transformation plan. The Minister will recall that he and I had a very useful meeting in February, along with his then colleague, Mr David Mowat. We had a useful discussion about the implications of the huge deficit in north-east London—£586 million—the potential huge cuts in the budget over the next four years, and the implications they might have. I raised the issue in detail in a debate on 16 December 2016 and that was why I had the meeting with Ministers.

I am very concerned that the funding gap, even if we have predicted regular savings of about £220 million or £240 million in the NHS, would still be £336 million by 2021. One of the most worrying points about the plan—I understand it is still a draft and has not been signed off—is that I went to a meeting last week when the people involved in the organisation considering the plan were discussing it and senior figures in the London NHS referred to it, saying, “You have to work within the basis of the plan.” It has not been signed off or approved, but the people in the NHS health economy in London are thinking ahead as though it will be.

The plan points out that the population of the north-east London boroughs will increase by 18% over the next 15 years, equivalent to a new city. Normally that level of population increase would require a new hospital, but there is no provision, no funding and no expectation of a new hospital. Instead, the proposal is to downgrade King George Hospital in my constituency and take away its accident and emergency department. That is still in the plan, and it is not a new proposal. In fact, I have been campaigning to save the A&E in my constituency for more than 10 years. But the formal decision was taken by the former Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, only in 2011. That decision, which was linked at the time to a suggestion of closing maternity services at King George Hospital, provided that those two things would happen in around two years. That was in October 2011.

The reality is that maternity services went to Queen's Hospital in early 2013—I do not question that there have been improvements—but the A&E could not close as there was no capacity at other hospitals in the region. In addition, it was quite clear that it required huge capital investment, which was not forthcoming. The decision was made in 2011, but in 2013 there was no action and the issue was deferred. The trust then went into special measures three years ago because of a variety of issues, which I have already mentioned.

As the trust comes out of special measures, the question becomes whether it will go ahead with the plans to close the A&E. Practically, it is impossible for that closure to happen soon, but the sustainability and transformation plan still states that the intention is to close the A&E in 2019. The original suggestion was that it would stop the 24-hour service, getting rid of the overnight A&E from September this year. That plan was dropped in January, and I welcome that, but the reality is that it is still in the plan and is still proposed. That cloud still hangs over the trust and all its excellent staff, who have done so much to bring our hospital out of special measures.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In my capacity as a Labour councillor in the London Borough

of Redbridge, I currently chair a cross-party working group on the future of A&E provision in north-east London. One frustrating thing is that all the local health leads in the area are working to a decision made by a previous Secretary of State. That ministerial decision still stands and the leads have to work towards it. They do not believe that is achievable or clinically sound. Yet, they point to the Secretary of State when pressed to abandon the plans. I hope that the Minister might be able to reverse that ministerial decision and remove the sword of Damocles from our A&E department.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful for that intervention as it saves me from making the same point. During the election campaign, the Secretary of State went to my hon. Friend's constituency for a private Conservative party function. He was asked by the local paper, the *Ilford Recorder*, about the plans to close the A&E at King George Hospital. He said that there were no plans to close it in the “foreseeable future”. Now, I do not know how big the crystal ball is. I do not know what kind of telescope the Secretary of State has and which end he is looking through. The fact is that “foreseeable” does not necessarily mean that the A&E will not close in 2019. If it is not going to close in the near future or even in the medium term, why not lift the cloud of uncertainty over the staff and over the planning process? Then we could have a serious look at the draft sustainability and transformation plan for north-east London, which is partly predicated on the closure of A&E at King George Hospital.

In January, the trust wrote a letter saying:

“It is our intention to make the changes by 2019 but please be assured nothing will happen until we are fully satisfied all the necessary resources are in place, including the additional capacity at the neighbouring hospitals, and we have made sure it is safe for our patients. In the meantime, the existing A&E facilities at King George will continue to operate as now.”

The reality is that there is no additional resource in terms of the capital that would be required to provide the beds for 400 patients at King George overall. We face a very uncertain future. If the A&E closed, where would those patients go? There would be a need for capital investment at Queen's and for big capital investment at Whipps Cross. That would take time and resources, at a time when NHS budgets are seriously pressed. And we still have that huge deficit in our regional health economy.

Why not take that issue off the agenda? Last month, my hon. Friend and I jointly wrote a letter with the leader of Redbridge Council, Councillor Jas Athwal, to the Secretary of State. We requested that he formally reverse the decision taken by his predecessor, to allow certainty and to allow more sensible planning.

Last week, one of our health campaigners, Andy Walker, who put in various questions and freedom of information requests—he is a very persistent campaigner—received a response from the Barking, Havering and Redbridge trust, commenting on this issue. It used the same formulation:

“We have been very clear that no changes will be made until we have the relevant assurances that it is safe to do so and this remains the case.”

That formulation has been used for several years; it is like a stuck record. It is not safe to make the changes. Why not have a new, imaginative approach that says,

[*Mike Gapes*]

“Let’s look at social care. Let’s look at the potential for developing the site. Let’s look at collaboration between the mental health services of the North East London NHS Foundation Trust. Let’s look at providing particular forms of housing and support.” This area could be a model for a new way forward.

I know from discussions I have had that people in various NHS organisations are working on such possibilities, but they cannot go any further than possible explorations while this cloud—the threat to close the A&E—still lies on the table. If the Secretary of State would take it off the table, we could have some serious discussions about improvements to health facilities. We could deal with not just the A&E but other issues.

On the King George site at the moment, we also have an urgent care centre. It recently had a Care Quality Commission inspection and was rated as “requires improvement”. That is an indication, again, of the problems we face. I have a lot of inadequate GP facilities in my constituency; I have lots of problems with people coming to me complaining that they cannot get through. Primary care in north-east London faces a crisis of retention, recruitment and standards of services. If we could make imaginative use of the facilities at the King George Hospital site, we could make a big difference to primary care, as well as to the acute services and the mental health services next door.

My plea to the Minister and the Government is this: take the closure of the A&E off the table, and let us then work collaboratively to improve the NHS in north-east London and in my constituency.

10.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Speaker, and to contribute to another debate introduced by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). I congratulate him on his tenacity in keeping the subject of King George Hospital at the forefront of Health Ministers’ minds in recent years, not least during my tenure. As he rightly said, he and I had a meeting in February with my former colleague, David Mowat, to discuss many of the issues that he has raised this evening. I therefore hope that he will forgive me if he has heard some of my remarks before. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on joining us. He obviously has experience of these matters as well, given his role in the local council.

I join the hon. Member for Ilford South in paying tribute to the achievement of all the staff and management involved at Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust in exiting special measures after what has undoubtedly been a long journey for them over the past three years. I was very pleased that they were able to exit special measures in March of this year. That is a huge tribute to everyone involved in ensuring that they were focused on the areas where the CQC had identified what was not best practice. They have focused on improving the deficiencies, and the fact that they were awarded an “improved” rating enabled us to take the decision we did. I also join him in congratulating the quality of management now substantively in place within the trust, at least one of whose members has himself been a beneficiary of treatment locally; I think it was

for a different complaint from the one that the hon. Gentleman was treated for in the intermediate treatment centre. That was a very substantial experience, and all credit to that member of the executive team.

The hon. Gentleman touched on a couple of clouds, as he described them. The first was the intermediate treatment centre, which conducts elective and planned procedures provided by an independent provider, Care UK. As he will appreciate—in fact, this took place under the previous Labour Government, when the independent sector provided capacity to support the NHS in a number of areas—we have had a policy of allowing independent providers to be commissioned to undertake care, and it is a matter for the local commissioners in his area to do so; it is not for me to tell them who are the best providers to be able to undertake care. I am very pleased that he was a beneficiary of some of that care. It will be up to the commissioners, working with the NHS, to decide who is best to provide services in his area as they come up for renewal from time to time.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the social care challenge that exists in north-east London, as it does in many other parts of the country. That is why we decided in the Budget in March this year to inject an additional £1 billion into the adult social care budgets of local authorities across the country and a further £1 billion in the next financial year. Moreover, last week, we announced some measures to scrutinise the performance of local authorities in managing those budgets—in particular, so that they contribute to the patient flow challenge, which we experience in many of our hospitals, including the King George: patients occupying hospital beds in acute settings who have no medical reason to continue to be there, because of the challenge of providing placements in the community. It is important that there is closer integration with social care through the local authorities, but also, as he rightly identifies, through other NHS providers, particularly if they are co-located on the site. He mentioned what he describes as an opportunity for the North-East London NHS Foundation Trust to work alongside Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust to try to smooth the passage and find other opportunities in the community for more appropriate flow. That is very interesting and I hope he is engaging with the leadership of the sustainability and transformation plan and proposing imaginative ideas, in the hope that they will be assessed appropriately when consideration is given to the provision of the future pattern of healthcare in his area.

The hon. Gentleman focused mostly on the challenge to A&E at King George. I will spend most of the rest of my remarks addressing his concerns as best I can. He will appreciate that, across the country, the NHS is coming together, through the STPs published at the end of last year, to identify the right pattern of care across an individual NHS footprint. North-east London has come together with the STP for that area. Our view is that that is the right way to encourage a more holistic approach to the future provision of NHS services. It needs to be led by clinicians and those responsible for managing NHS organisations, and it needs to work in a collaborative and perhaps more open way than it has in the past with local authorities, which have a part to play, as I have said, in facilitating the passage beyond hospital and back into the community.

We are absolutely clear that any significant service change that arises out of the implementation of STPs, if they get to that stage, must be subject to full public consultation, and proposals must meet the Government's four reconfiguration tests, which are support from clinical commissioners, clarity on the clinical evidence base, robust patient and public engagement, and support for patient choice. Additional NHS guidance means that proposed service reconfigurations should be tested for their impact on overall bed numbers in the area, which the hon. Gentleman has identified appears to be absent from the STP at present. I urge him to continue to challenge that in his area.

Wes Streeting: Will the Minister clarify whether he expects the STP process to now publicly consult on any future proposal to close the A&E at King George Hospital? Furthermore, were the STP to recommend to Ministers that the A&E should remain, will they heed that advice and agree that the STP process should not be constrained by the decision made in 2011 by the then Secretary of State?

Mr Dunne: I am going to have to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, because I am not in a position to second guess the conclusions of the STP discussions and recommendations. It is appropriate for them to take into account clinical decisions made in the recent past, one of which is the decision about the A&E at King George. It is up to the STP management to decide whether to take that forward as the STP evolves. It is right that the STP management looks at health provision in the round. It will be responsible for delivering healthcare to local residents and it needs to take into account all the information sources available to it. I do not think it is right to say that it necessarily has to re-consult on certain issues. It needs to form a view on the right configuration and then use its available data sources and go through the processes.

I will try to explain to the hon. Gentleman the process that, as I understand it, is now under way in his area. Both hon. Gentlemen are right to say that, in 2011, on advice from the independent reconfiguration panel, which approved the proposal, the then Secretary of State took the decision that the north-east London scheme should be allowed to proceed. The Secretary of State made it clear at the time—it has since been repeated in response to questions about the health authorities in the area—that no changes were to take place until it was clinically safe to do so. I believe that remarks that the Secretary of State might have made when visiting the area recently must be considered in that context.

There have been a number of changes since the decision was made, and there are four elements to the process. First, the STP team is reviewing and revalidating the modelling used back in 2010 to ensure that the proposals that were made remain appropriate, as one would expect the team to do. Secondly, the governing members of the

CCG board, the trust board and the STP board will need to agree the business case that arises from the STP recommendations. Thirdly, if that is achieved, NHS England and NHS Improvement will be required to approve the business case. Finally, it is envisaged that a clinically led gateway assurance team—an NHS construct—will manage a series of gateway reviews at different stages of the process from planning to implementation, as the project proceeds, to assure system readiness and patient safety at every step of the way, should the decisions necessary to get there be taken in the intervening period.

Mike Gapes: Does the Minister think that the whole process could be completed by 2019?

Mr Dunne: I will have to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, because it is not for me to prejudge how long the process would take. In all honesty, I think it is most unlikely that it would be completed in less than two years. It is conceivable that it would be concluded by the end of 2019, but a two-year process is likely to be required as a minimum.

In the meantime, CQC visits and reports will continue on a routine basis. Now that the trust is out of special measures, those visits will be somewhat less frequent than they were while the trust was in special measures. Any information coming out of that process will inform decisions taken by the trust and the STP area.

In my final comments, I want to reassure the hon. Gentlemen and their constituents that the proposals include a new urgent care centre at King George Hospital to provide emergency support to local residents for the majority of present A&E attendances. Blue-light trauma and emergency cases requiring full support from emergency medical teams would be taken to other hospitals in the area, but the majority of cases currently treated at King George would continue to be treated there. The new urgent care centre would benefit from several improvements, including more space and access for diagnosis, X-ray, blood tests and so on. I hope that that gives the hon. Gentlemen some reassurance that the facilities that remained at King George would continue to provide the majority of their constituents with the care that they would need in an emergency.

Wes Streeting: Is the Minister saying that the STP process should not be constrained by the 2011 decision if those in charge of the process think that that was the wrong decision?

Mr Dunne: The process should be informed by the decisions taken in 2010, but it will be up to today's STP leadership to decide what to do.

Question put and agreed to.

10.29 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Tuesday 11 July 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[*MR SPEAKER in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CITY OF LONDON (OPEN SPACES) BILL

Ordered,

That the promoters of the City of London Corporation (Open Spaces) Bill, which originated in this House in Session 2015-16 on 22 January 2016, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

MIDDLE LEVEL BILL

Motion made,

That the promoters of the Middle Level Bill, which originated in this House in the previous Session on 24 January 2017, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Tuesday 18 July.

NEW SOUTHGATE CEMETERY BILL [LORDS]

Ordered,

That the promoters of the New Southgate Cemetery Bill [Lords], which originated in the House of Lords in Session 2015-16 on 25 January 2016, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

SESSIONAL RETURNS

Ordered,

That there be laid before this House Returns for Session 2016-17 of information and statistics relating to:

- (1) Business of the House
- (2) Closure of Debate, Proposal of Question and Allocation of Time (including Programme Motions)
- (3) Sittings of the House
- (4) Private Bills and Private Business
- (5) Public Bills
- (6) Delegated Legislation and Legislative Reform Orders
- (7) European Legislation, etc
- (8) Grand Committees
- (9) Panel of Chairs
- (10) Select Committees.—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Illegal Wildlife Trade

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the illegal trade in wildlife. [900338]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I wish to begin by congratulating Iraq's security forces on liberating Mosul from the pitiless grasp of Daesh. The flag of Iraq flies once more in the country's second city and I pay tribute to the pilots of the RAF who played a vital role in supporting this operation, delivering more airstrikes than anyone else apart from the United States. The House can take pride in what they have done.

On the illegal wildlife trade, we can be pleased with the agreement that the Prime Minister helped to secure at the G20 summit in Hamburg. It is about cracking down not only on the trade in charismatic megafauna, but on those who engage in gunrunning, people trafficking and much other human misery, as well as illegal wildlife trafficking. We can be proud of what we are doing.

Nigel Huddleston: I applaud the efforts the Government are making in this area. I am also pleased that the UK will host the illegal wildlife trade conference in 2018. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm how much money the Department has committed to tackling the illegal wildlife trade and how effectively the money is being spent?

Boris Johnson: I can confirm that we are increasing our contribution to £26 million—another £13 million to tackle the illegal wildlife trade. I have myself seen what UK-financed projects are doing in Kenya to crack down on this vile trade.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I say to the Foreign Secretary that we simply have to give this subject a much higher priority than we do—not only our Government, but across the world. Every week or month we see programmes on our televisions—55 African elephants are poached every day. He has to make this a priority. It is not good enough for us to look at our television screens and feel sorry about it—we have to have a far greater commitment to do something about it.

Boris Johnson: I completely share the hon. Gentleman's zeal and passion. The UK has in fact been in the lead on this for several years now, and we will continue to push the agenda, not just at the G20, as the Prime Minister did, but at the IWT summit that we will host in October 2018 in London.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend talk a little about his strategy on this issue, because the link between the illegal wildlife

trade, smuggling, people trafficking, and lawlessness and violence in many countries is extremely real? Addressing the illegal wildlife trade may seem esoteric, but it is not: it is about the stability of many nations that are firm partners of the United Kingdom.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is right: this is far from esoteric. It not only touches the hearts of millions of people in our country—as the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said—but helps to cause increased human misery. The same people are involved in trade in drugs, arms and people, worth up to £13 billion a year, and we are playing a major part in frustrating that trade.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): There is increasing evidence that the UK's legal ivory market has been used as cover for illegal trade. What discussions will the Foreign Secretary have with colleagues about an all-out ban on the ivory trade, as previously committed to?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have a commitment to an all-out ban on the sale of ivory in this country, and that is what we intend to pursue.

Exiting the EU

2. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support and deliver an effective departure for the UK from the EU. [900339]

14. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help support and deliver an effective departure for the UK from the EU. [900351]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My Department continues to support EU exit negotiations, and the Government work to strengthen our relations with partners worldwide. As a champion of free trade, we will continue to seize the opportunities afforded by Brexit and guarantee our long-term global prosperity.

Rachel Maclean: Businesses in my constituency are seeking to make the most of the opportunities that Brexit provides for them, but can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will work closely with the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that businesses that are already trading with the single market are helped to build new export markets for their goods and services around the world, to secure their continued prosperity?

Boris Johnson: Absolutely. I congratulate my hon. Friend on what I believe is her first question—I think it is a very good one. She can reassure her constituents that not only will the excellent companies in her constituency be able to continue to enjoy free trade with the rest of the European Union—with the EU27—but they will, of course, have the additional opportunity afforded by the new free trade deals that we will be able to strike with countries around the world. I am pleased to say that they were queuing up to make that point to the Prime Minister at the G20 in Hamburg.

Sir Edward Leigh: Today is the feast day of St Benedict, the patron saint of Europe, who famously warned about “murmuring in the community” against the abbess. Will my right hon. Friend please proclaim that we do not want any murmuring from anyone against our vision of an open, free trade Europe—the best possible free trade deal, leading the world towards free trade and untold prosperity?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point. Members on both sides of the House know very well that 80% or 85% of us were elected on a very clear manifesto pledge to come out of the European Union, to come out of the single market and—as the leader of the Labour party has said—to come out of the customs union as well. Nothing could be clearer than that. I think that what the people of this country want us to do is get on and deliver a great Brexit, and I have no doubt that, with the support of Opposition Members, we can achieve it.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with the Chancellor and the First Secretary of State that we shall need a transitional period of at least three years during which we will remain under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice?

Boris Johnson: No. Neither the Chancellor nor the First Secretary of State has said any such thing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. My apologies to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who rose momentarily after his right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)—cue him being called second, but I am sure he does not mind.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am grateful, Mr Speaker.

In March, the Foreign Secretary said that leaving the EU with no deal would be perfectly okay. Last month, however, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that that would be a very, very bad outcome for Britain. Given that the two positions are clearly completely contradictory, who should the British public believe?

Boris Johnson: I think that what the British public can take from both the Chancellor and myself—and, indeed, from the vast majority of Labour Members, as I understand their position—is that we all want to get on and do the deal, to do the best deal possible, and to leave the EU.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What lessons does my right hon. Friend take from the Australian Government, who negotiated free trade deals with China, Japan and South Korea in very short order by focusing on trade itself rather than getting bogged down in disputes with regard to standards, legalities and regulations?

Boris Johnson: I agree very much with what my hon. Friend has said. I think that, with a bit of gumption and a bit of positive energy, there is no limit to what we can achieve, and we should get on and do it. Of course, we cannot ink in the free trade deals now, but we can certainly pencil in the outlines.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the Prime Minister's spokesman was reported as saying that,

"the transition rules could involve the European Court of Justice for a limited time...that's all a matter for negotiation."

That is the quote that was reported. So can the Foreign Secretary confirm this change in Government policy, and set out the rationale behind it?

Boris Johnson: We are in a negotiation whose objective is to come out from under the penumbra of the European Court of Justice, and outside the EU legal order, and that is what we will achieve.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Since we joined the Common Market on 1 January 1973 until the date we leave, we will have given the EU and its predecessors, in today's money in real terms, a total of £209 billion. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear to the EU that if it wants a penny piece more, it can go whistle?

Boris Johnson: I am sure that my hon. Friend's words will have broken like a thunderclap over Brussels and they will pay attention to what he has said. He makes a very valid point; the sums that I have seen that they propose to demand from this country seem to me to be extortionate, and I think that to "go whistle" is an entirely appropriate expression.

21. [900358] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the Secretary of State ensure, in a spirit of co-operation, that the final Brexit deal is endorsed by the devolved Parliaments before it is signed?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows very well, we work closely under the Joint Ministerial Committee to bring in the devolved Administrations and make sure the great deal we are going to get has their endorsement and approval.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Further to the question by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), did my right hon. Friend hear the report on the "Today" programme this morning that other European leaders were making it clear that they would not accept a deal on any terms, and does he share my view that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander?

Boris Johnson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the birth of what I believe is his sixth child. He makes a very good point about the negotiating stance of our friends and partners across the channel. They do sound at the moment pretty hard over, as we say in the Foreign Office, but I have no doubt that in the fullness of time a suppleness will descend, and a willingness to compromise, because, after all, a great Brexit deal, a great free trade deal, and a deep and special partnership is in the interests of both sides of the channel.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Given the Prime Minister's appeal to these Benches to help her out today, where does the Foreign Secretary think there are areas for compromise?

Boris Johnson: As I have said before, the striking thing about this debate is how much unanimity there really is between the two sides of the Chamber on these fundamental questions, and I have been very struck that the leader of the Labour party seems to be very much on all fours with the objectives of the Brexit—[Interruption.] He very much agrees with the position we are taking, and I hope to see him in the Lobby with us.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I hate to disagree with the Foreign Secretary: while he is right to say that the Leader of the Opposition is fully behind the Government and those on the Conservative Benches are fully behind the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, the Opposition are hopelessly split on this issue, and is that not hindering the Government's negotiating position?

Boris Johnson: It is not for me to comment on the ability of the Labour leader to control his own party. I take it that Labour Members are all following official Labour party policy, which is to come out of the EU and the single market. If they are not, they can stand up now and, by their questions, betray their real position, but as far as I know they are supporting the will of the British people as expressed last year. If they wish to dissent from that, now is the time.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the new Foreign Office Front Benchers to their positions? Back in July last year, they chastised me when I wrongly accused them of being an all-male team. If only I had waited a year, I would have been correct after all.

Talking of female Tory MPs, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) used a disgusting, racist phrase in her comments at the East India Club, and I hope the Foreign Secretary will join me in condemning them; I hope he will agree that derogatory, offensive language deriving from the era of American slavery has no place in modern society. But the hon. Lady was at least trying to ask a valid question—a question about what would happen if Britain failed to reach a deal on Brexit. So may I ask the Foreign Secretary to answer that question today? Can he explain what that no deal option would mean for the people and businesses of Great Britain?

Boris Johnson: As I said before, the chances of such an outcome are vanishingly unlikely, since it is manifestly in the interests of those on both sides of the channel to get a great free trade deal and a new deep and special partnership between us and the European Union. That is what we are going to achieve.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that answer, but unfortunately it leaves us none the wiser. This is slightly baffling because it was, after all, the Prime Minister—the Prime Minister for now, at least—who decided to put the no deal option on the table. She could not stop using the phrase during the election campaign. But now, when we ask what it would mean in practice, the Government refuse to tell us. The Foreign Affairs Committee said in December:

"The Government should require each Department to produce a 'no deal' plan, outlining the likely consequences...and setting out proposals to mitigate potential risks."

It went on to state that anything less would be a "dereliction of duty", and that we cannot have a repeat—

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the right hon. Lady but she really does need to bring herself to a single-sentence question, because there are lots of colleagues who want to take part. She is normally very succinct, but today is an exception. Return to form!

Emily Thornberry: Given that a plan for no deal would be worse than that dereliction of duty, will the Foreign Secretary spell out publicly what no deal would mean? If he is not prepared to tell us that publicly, can he reassure us that at the very least he has a detailed private plan to manage that risk?

Boris Johnson: There is no plan for no deal, because we are going to get a great deal. For the sake of illustration, I remind the right hon. Lady that there was a time, which I am old enough to remember, when Britain was not in what we then called the Common Market.

Mayflower Pilgrims

3. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower pilgrims in 2020 in the UK and abroad. [900340]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Foreign Office officials are working closely with colleagues from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to prepare for the 400th anniversary. I am pleased that Oliver Colvile, the former Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, has been appointed chair of the Mayflower committee by the Prime Minister. The committee will make the most of the opportunity to commemorate the legacy of the pilgrims and the special relationship.

John Mann: I thought the Prime Minister wanted help from Opposition Members, and here I am, available—the re-elected co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Mayflower pilgrims—unlike Olly, who now has other pursuits to pursue. I was prepared to offer my services to take on that role, rather than a non-parliamentarian. Nevertheless, can the good people of Bassetlaw expect support from this Government, as promised by George Osborne, to properly celebrate the fact that the pilgrims and their legacy—including the modern United States—originated in Bassetlaw?

Sir Alan Duncan: At least the hon. Gentleman did not claim that Bassetlaw had strong coastal links. We already welcome his contribution to the House in the form of the comments he made on 9 March 2016, when he reminded us that the anniversary would provide an “historic opportunity” for us to celebrate. Across the House, we will think of every possible way in which we can do so to best effect.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The importance of this anniversary, in British-American relations, can hardly be overstated. Would not 2020 be a more suitable date for a state visit from the President of the United States, to mark that anniversary, rather than in the months to come?

Sir Alan Duncan: I note my hon. Friend’s suggestion, but that matter is already in train and the visit—offer to the President—stands.

Ukraine

4. Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic and political development in Ukraine. [900341]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The UK is in the lead on this issue, helping Ukraine to make the vital reforms that it needs, and to continue to crack down on corruption, which is so important if we are going to encourage long-term and continued investment in a successful Ukraine.

Mr Whittingdale: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the organisation last week of the Ukraine reform conference in London, which demonstrated that Britain will continue to play a leading role on the world stage in the years to come. Can he confirm that, while Ukraine still faces major challenges, progress is being made in areas such as tackling corruption? Will he also tell us what more can be done to assist it?

Boris Johnson: May I get the ball back over the net by congratulating my right hon. Friend on becoming chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine? All of us in this House have a clear interest in a strong and successful Ukraine, which is why we have invested another £33 million in helping the Ukrainians to tackle their governance problems. The House should be in no doubt about what is going on in Ukraine. It is, if you like, an arm wrestle between two value systems: our way of looking at the world and the Russian way of looking at the world. It is vital for our continent and for this country that our way prevails. With British help, I believe that it is prevailing and will prevail.

23. [900360] Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not one of the real problems that the Russians are actively meddling in Ukraine? So far, there has been no sign of all the efforts that Britain has rightly made paying dividends in Russia stopping its corrupt meddling in that country.

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the fault lies squarely with Russia. Russia annexed Crimea and continues to drive the problems in the Donbass. The UK is contributing to the efforts to stave off Russian military meddling with the non-lethal equipment that we have agreed to send to Ukraine. More importantly, however, we are engaged in helping the Ukrainians to sort out their domestic political scene and to crack down on corruption. To be fair to them, not only are they seeing growth of 1.5% or 4%, depending on whose figures are to be believed, but they have made more progress in cracking down on corruption in the past three years than in the past 25 years. A very different country is being born.

Canada: Diplomatic Relations

5. Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the UK’s diplomatic relations with Canada. [900342]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Our bilateral relationship is strong because it is a deep bond of friendship that is rooted in our shared histories and common values. We look forward to strengthening those ties over the coming years and have agreed to hold regular strategic talks to maximise the full potential of this important bilateral relationship.

Andrew Percy: I thank the Minister for that response. Canadian investment is hugely important in my constituency and across the UK. As we move forward with leaving the European Union and seeking a free trade deal with Canada, our relationship will be more important—specifically our relationships with the provincial governments. Do we have a network in place across Canada to ensure that we are making the best of those relationships?

Sir Alan Duncan: On the House's behalf, may I express our sympathy to all those in British Columbia who have been affected by the damaging wildfires? Our consulates-general in Calgary, Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver work with provincial governments to increase bilateral trade and investment, particularly in the infrastructure sector. We are working across all levels of the Canadian Government to ensure that British companies can take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the Canada-EU comprehensive economic and trade agreement.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have strong family relationships in Canada. Is the Minister not aware that senior diplomats in Canada are absolutely aghast at how this Government are handling our withdrawal from Europe and its impact on world trade? They believe that this swashbuckling sector of Ministers are not the right people—*[Interruption.]* Well, I have to say that positive energy and gumption will not give us a good deal in Europe. We need people who have an eye for detail; this Foreign Secretary has no idea about detail.

Sir Alan Duncan: I simply do not recognise the analysis that the hon. Gentleman offers the House on any matter that he just mentioned. Our opportunities for future trade with Canada will be enormous once we have left the European Union.

24. [900361] **Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I thank the Minister for his answers so far. As he will be aware, 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of the Canadian Confederation, and our two nations have faced together some of the most difficult challenges in history during that period. Does he agree that that provides a great opportunity to build on our relationship and that we should reject the nonsense that we have just heard?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I agree emphatically with my hon. Friend. We offer our congratulations to Canada on the 150th anniversary of the Canadian Confederation, and we are pleased that Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall were able to join the celebrations in Ottawa to mark the occasion. On a practical basis, the Foreign Secretary met Foreign Minister Freeland last week and agreed to hold regular strategic talks to ensure that we can maximise the full potential of this important and close bilateral relationship way beyond the expectations of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

Diplomatic Relations: Philippines

6. **Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con):** What steps he is taking to strengthen diplomatic relations with the Philippines. [900343]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We have a strong and wide-ranging relationship with the Philippines on prosperity, education and security issues. Ministerial visits to the Philippines and annual high-level talks between officials help to progress that co-operation—my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the former Minister for Asia and the Pacific, was there as recently as last December—which enables us to discuss human rights concerns while pursuing closer diplomatic and trade links.

Justin Tomlinson: My constituent Kevin Taylor has been held in the Philippines since 2008. The Filipino authorities continually delayed his case, held him in unsafe conditions and, finally, sentenced him to 12 years for an employment offence. They have now failed even to acknowledge a clemency request, despite his very poor health. With his health failing further and amid concerns about the safety of the institution, and with his parents worried that they will not see him again, will my right hon. Friend set out what is being done to support the family's efforts to bring him home?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for all his assiduous work over many years on behalf of Mr Taylor's parents, his constituents in North Swindon. We have been providing ongoing consular and welfare support to Kevin Taylor since his arrest almost 10 years ago. Most recently, he was visited in prison, and we liaised with his parents only yesterday. Our consular support has also extended to delivering funds and vitamins. Most recently, we requested additional medical appointments after Mr Taylor brought his health concerns to our attention. A clemency request was made as recently as 2015, but I reassure my hon. Friend that we will do our level best to continue that work. I will be in touch with our department in Manila to ask it to redouble those efforts in the days ahead.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In the year since Rodrigo Duterte became President of the Philippines, 13,000 people have been killed. He has threatened to extend martial law across the entire country, and last week he said that he would eat the livers of terrorists with salt and vinegar, but the Secretary of State for International Trade claims that Britain has “shared values” with President Duterte. Can the Minister tell the House which values we share with the President?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will recognise that there are shared values on international trade, and it is not an issue of ditching anything else. I, like her, am very concerned by the high death toll in the war on illegal drugs that has come to a head under President Duterte. We have been urging much more thorough and independent investigations into all violent deaths, and the Foreign Office has repeatedly raised, and will continue to raise, human rights concerns with the Administration. I hope to visit Manila at some point to make precisely the case that the hon. Lady has made.

Zimbabwe

7. Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the political and economic situation in Zimbabwe. [900344]

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's long campaign on this subject. Our policy on Zimbabwe continues to be to try to balance our deep distaste at the horrifying record of the Mugabe regime with a genuine concern for the humanitarian needs of the Zimbabwean people, who have suffered terribly over the past 40 years.

Kate Hoey: I welcome the Minister to his position and wish him every success.

Mugabe spent \$53 million on private travel overseas last year. At the same time, the United Kingdom is paying proportionately more in aid to that country than to any other country in Africa. Does the Minister think that, with the elections coming next year and Mugabe refusing to implement the 2013 constitution, now is the time to put some of that money into helping voter education in those rural areas controlled by ZANU-PF, or we will not have free and fair elections?

Rory Stewart: I agree. We are trying to balance a very difficult thing, which, as the hon. Lady says, is the terrible performance of the Mugabe regime with the fact that people in that country have been dying of cholera and suffering extreme humanitarian need. The hon. Lady is absolutely correct that focusing on free and fair elections is one of the most important things we can do in a country such as Zimbabwe.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The policy of incremental engagement with Zimbabwe is obviously the best—sometimes an unpalatable best—policy, but will the Minister consider visiting Zimbabwe in the near term, as that would be a great step forward and would perhaps put the UK in a better position for the relationship in the longer term?

Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has huge expertise as a former Africa Minister. The decision on whether or not I, as the Minister, visit Zimbabwe depends a great deal on the genuine commitment to reform of the Zimbabwean Government, and I will be guided by the ambassador in the country on when such a visit would be necessary and possible.

Venezuela

8. Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the breakdown in the rule of law in Venezuela. [900345]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My colleagues and I are in close contact with our international counterparts, including most recently at the Organisation of American States summit in Cancun last month. I issued a very strong statement on 6 July, utterly condemning the 5 July attack on Venezuela's National Assembly and its elected Members, and calling for the Venezuelan Government to uphold the constitution and show respect for democratic institutions. That statement was echoed by many colleagues across the world.

Robert Neill: The Leader of the Opposition described the regime in Venezuela as offering an “alternative agenda” from which we could learn. The alternative agenda has seen the economy collapse and poverty increase. It has seen scores of people killed in civil unrest and now an attempt to undermine both the elected Congress and the independent attorney general. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Her Majesty's Government strongly condemn the attempt by the Maduro regime to rewrite the constitution and rub out democracy?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Leader of the Opposition does seem to be a great fan of the Venezuelan Government, giving a passable impression himself of Fidel Castro, one sometimes thinks. What is happening to the Venezuelan economy gives us a clear indication of what would happen to the UK economy if ever the right hon. Gentleman were Prime Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What practical steps have the British Government taken to deal with famine on the border between Venezuela and Colombia?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are no easy such attempts; we do not have a bilateral programme, but we are in touch with the United Nations. The hon. Lady's very question illustrates the extent to which the Venezuelan Government have driven their own people to poverty; they are running short of the some of the most basic goods on which they have to live.

Illegal Settlements: Occupied Palestinian Territories

9. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What steps he is taking to encourage the Israeli authorities to stop the building of illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [900346]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): We regularly raise these issues with Israel, calling for a reversal of the policy of settlement expansion. I reiterated that in the House of Commons last week, and recently both the Foreign Secretary and I have made statements strongly condemning proposals for new settlement expansion in both the west bank and East Jerusalem.

Tommy Sheppard: Only last week, the right-wing Israeli Government announced a further expansion of the illegal settlement programme, so it is clear that whatever action the British Government are taking it is not working. Is it not therefore time that Her Majesty's Government gave a more robust response to this problem, including by discouraging investment in and trade with the illegal settlements, and ensuring the proper labelling of imported goods so that they are designated as coming from “an illegally Occupied Palestinian Territory”?

Alistair Burt: This is a long and difficult process, as the hon. Gentleman rightly knows. We have a policy on labelling, and continued conversations will go on with the state of Israel in relation to suggestions, such as we heard last week, that new housing units should be built in East Jerusalem. This is a complex process and the UK does not believe in boycotts or sanctions, but clear labelling has been in place for some time so that consumers can take their choice.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): We have contributed to a number of EU structures that have been demolished. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Government of Israel for our money back?

Alistair Burt: I think my right hon. Friend is referring to some work done by the EU. The EU has not sought compensation from the state of Israel in relation to that, and no decision has been taken on any further action.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Settlements are a barrier, but they are far from the only barrier to peace. The building blocks for the peace process are trade and economic development in the west bank; demilitarisation and democracy in Gaza; and support for co-existence projects that get Israelis and Palestinians working together, the funding for which, I am sorry to say, this Government have stopped. Will the Minister reinstate funding for co-existence projects, to build the peace process?

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman understands this issue extremely well, and I agree with his analysis that this is a complex issue, where there are many different building blocks to try to revitalise the peace process, and settlements are far from the only barrier to that. Trade and investment remain important, but we will be looking further at what prospects there are for any new initiatives. I am aware of the co-existence projects that he mentions, and I will certainly be looking at that when carrying out my joint responsibilities in the Department for International Development.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): We are all glad to see the Minister for the Middle East back and working on this issue again, but this is the second time in the space of a week that the Foreign Secretary has declined to speak about the middle east and devolved the job to the Minister instead—and that follows his failure even to mention Israel or Palestine in the Tory election manifesto. I simply ask the Minister: when are we going to hear the Foreign Secretary stand up and condemn the new illegal settlements?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her warm welcome. I much enjoy being back in this role, no matter what is thrown at me as part of it. The Foreign Secretary strongly condemned the proposals that were announced for the west bank recently. I like to think he has confidence in his Minister for the Middle East—as he has confidence in his full ministerial team—to answer appropriate questions, although I have never known him to be shy of answering a question when necessary.

Climate Change

10. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Government are taking to support the implementation of the Paris agreement on climate change. [900347]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The United Kingdom was instrumental in securing the Paris agreement on climate change. We are helping other countries to meet their

targets and we are confident that we will be able to meet our own groundbreaking target of reducing emissions by 80% by 2050.

Alex Norris: Last week, Downing Street said that the Prime Minister intended to challenge President Trump on climate change at the G20 meeting. Would it not have been better to do that before he announced that the United States was pulling out of the Paris agreement, rather than after?

Boris Johnson: As I have told the House before, we have repeatedly made our views clear to the US Administration. We have expressed our dismay that they have withdrawn, but on the other hand all Members, on both sides of the House, should in all fairness acknowledge that the United States has made and continues to make, even under this Administration, substantial progress in reducing greenhouse gases. This country has reduced CO₂ emissions by 42% since 1990, despite a 67% increase in GDP; the United States has achieved comparable progress, and we intend to encourage it on that path.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Following Donald Trump's isolation on the issue of the Paris agreement at last week's G20 summit, and his further postponement of his visit to the UK, I ask the Secretary of State a simple question: do the Government still regard President Trump as the leader of the free world? If so, how do they rate the job he is doing, as a mark out of 10?

Boris Johnson: I hesitate to say it, but we certainly regard as very considerable the Prime Minister's achievement in getting the US President to sign up to the G20 agreement on climate change, as she did.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): What?

Boris Johnson: Absolutely right. The Prime Minister was instrumental in getting the Americans to sign up to the communiqué. Members on both sides of the House will appreciate that whatever their disagreements with the current incumbent of the White House, the President of the United States is the leader of our most important ally, and he therefore deserves this country's respect and consideration.

Human Rights

11. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What discussions he has had with his counterparts in other countries on promoting human rights. [900348]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): With the Foreign Secretary's permission, I can say that ensuring the promotion of human rights and engaging with this issue is an essential part of the foreign policy of global Britain. Ministers meet their counterparts regularly and raise issues including those relating to LGBTI people, gender equality, modern slavery, freedom of belief and religion, the death penalty and torture. This is an essential part of who we are as the United Kingdom and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Liz Twist: Back in March, the UN Human Rights Council established an independent commission to investigate the many alleged atrocities committed against the Rohingya people in Myanmar. In the light of ongoing abuses, including recent reports of Rohingya women being raped by the security forces, does the Minister agree that the perpetrators of such crimes should be brought to justice as a matter of urgency, and what steps is he taking to progress these cases?

Alistair Burt: I welcome the hon. Lady to the House. I was recently in Burma and was able to reaffirm the United Kingdom's support for the independent United Nations Commission. Again, those in Burma are wrestling with this very difficult issue. The United Kingdom remains very close to the humanitarian needs of the Rohingya people in Rakhan.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The World Trade Organisation estimates that three out of four new trade deals include provisions to improve human rights around the world. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his colleagues in the Department for International Trade to ensure that, where appropriate, our new trade deals include obligations to improve human rights?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend is right: ensuring that human rights are an essential part of the United Kingdom's policy on trade deals is an important part of the future and will continue to be a key part of our prosperity drive.

25. [900362] **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Following the arrests of Amnesty International Turkey director and chair, Idil Eser, and Taner Kılıç—both examples of a worrying shift away from respect for human rights in Turkey—what steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure their immediate and unconditional release?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Lady knows these issues extremely well. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised the matter with his counterpart, and the Prime Minister raised it with the President of Turkey at the G20. This remains a very important issue for the United Kingdom.

15. **Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): [900352] On his recent visit to Burma, did my right hon. Friend encourage the Burmese Government to allow full access and to co-operate fully with the fact-finding mission of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees into human rights issues in that country?

Alistair Burt: Yes, indeed. It is a difficult issue, but we have made it clear that the UN independent report needs full consideration. We have urged the Government to do all they can to facilitate what the UN needs to complete its work. An internal investigation is already being carried out by the Burmese Government.

19. [900356] **Mrs Madeleine Moon** (Bridgend) (Lab): Kamal Foroughi and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe are in prison in Iran. We have been unable to gain access to them through our consul. What efforts are being made

to use other countries to ensure that the human rights and, in particular, medical needs of these two people are protected?

Alistair Burt: I met Richard Ratcliffe and the family just last week. I have already raised this issue directly with my counterpart, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, and with the Iranian ambassador here. We remain very concerned about this and other consular cases involving Iran. I assure the hon. Lady and the House that we will continue to raise them at the highest level.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope to hear briefly from Fabian Hamilton from the Front Bench, because I want to get through two more questions.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As the Government celebrated their victory in the High Court over arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the number of people affected by the cholera epidemic in Yemen passed 300,000. Humanitarian workers now face the agonising choice of whether to use their dwindling food supplies to feed those children suffering from malnutrition or those infected with cholera. In that context, will the Minister tell the House why the Saudi-led coalition continues to use British bombs to attack farms, food factories and water plants?

Alistair Burt: Yesterday's court judgment was unequivocal in stating that the United Kingdom had fulfilled its obligations on controlling the arms trade. The work being done with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on its response to international humanitarian law was fundamental to that judgment. The situation in Yemen remains a humanitarian disaster. The United Kingdom is actively involved in seeking to do all it can. The cholera outbreak is currently claiming some 6,500 new cases every day. I am pleased that the Department for International Development is fully engaged and is trying to do all it can to mitigate these actions.

Mr Speaker: Question 12.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): My right hon. Friend—[*Interruption.*]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): He is new, and I thought that I was new too.

Maldives

12. **Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political situation in the Maldives. [900349]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Like many in the House, I am concerned that democratic freedoms continue to face restriction in the Maldives. Pressure on Opposition politicians, including arrests and prosecutions, has grown. Human rights activists, civil society and the media are under increasing threat. Her Majesty's Government, I assure the House, raise these issues frequently with the Government of the Maldives, and we led the recent UN statement in the June Human Rights Council.

Zac Goldsmith: Apologies, Mr Speaker; I am new to the House.

My right hon. Friend the Minister will know that a coalition of opposition parties in the Maldives, led by former President Mohamed Nasheed and committed to democracy and to improving relations with this country, has secured a majority in that country's Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that the regime of President Yameen might resort to illegal means to prevent Parliament from functioning properly in that country?

Mark Field: I am very concerned about that prospect. In recent years, in any part of the political environment in the Maldives, no one's hands have been entirely clean—it has not been a happy situation across the board. The Government's biggest regret is that the Maldives unilaterally left the Commonwealth in 2016, and I very much hope that a new regime will bring them back into the international regime.

UN Peacekeeping Operations

13. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of proposed reductions to US financial contributions to the UN budget on the delivery of UN peacekeeping operations. [900350]

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): We should pay tribute to what the United States has done with its peacekeeping budget. It provides well over a quarter of the global peacekeeping budget: over \$2 billion a year, which is largely not “odable”. We need to pay tribute to the US and to encourage it to continue to play a role, as it is a central part of peacekeeping worldwide. Its sticking to the congressional limit of 25% is vital for UN peacekeeping operations.

Mr Cunningham: Does the Minister agree that the loss of financial support from the US will be devastating for UN agencies such as the World Food Programme and the UN Refugee Agency? Will he therefore urge the Trump Administration to reconsider their planned cuts?

Rory Stewart: It is absolutely right, of course, that in the current global situation UN peacekeeping operations are vital, but reforms can be introduced. The move in Côte d'Ivoire to close down the peacekeeping operation and the changes in Darfur are welcome. We can reduce peacekeeping costs, but it is vital that the United States and others continue to play a strong role. American financial support has been vital for the past 50 years, and we hope that it will continue to be over the next 50.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: May I remind colleagues that topical questions are supposed to be short? If Members insist on asking long questions they will be cut off, as it is not fair on colleagues.

T1. [900328] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My immediate priority is to help to resolve the tensions in the Gulf, where Britain has old friendships and vital interests. That is why I have just returned from visits to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait

and Qatar, where I reinforced the need for dialogue and de-escalation. Tomorrow, I will attend a summit in Trieste on the western Balkans region, where the UK is playing a vital role in guaranteeing stability and resisting Russian ambitions.

Bob Blackman: In Jammu Kashmir yesterday terrorists brutally murdered seven Hindu pilgrims, including five women, as they undertook amaranth yatra. What action has my right hon. Friend taken to condemn that terrorist outrage, and what support will he give to recovering and bringing to justice the terrorists, who, we believe, emanate from Pakistan?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We are in close contact with the Indian and Pakistani high commissioners about Kashmir. I assure him that we will bring this up over the next 24 hours and ask for a plan of action, as he requests.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that if there is to be an extension of military action in Syria there should be a full debate and vote in the House?

Boris Johnson: That is for the Leader of the House to consider, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that no such request has been made. The difference in the American Administration's attitude and engagement, for which many Opposition Members have called, is to be welcomed.

T2. [900329] **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): As America appears to be voluntarily surrendering both power and influence, and with our impending departure from the main platform of our influence over the past several decades, is it not vital that the Foreign Office now invests substantially to beef up our diplomatic effort so that we may retain our prosperity, security and influence abroad?

Boris Johnson: I am delighted to welcome my right hon. Friend to a cause that is gathering strength among Members on both sides of the House. Everybody understands that a truly global Britain must be properly supported and financed. We have a world-class network of 278 embassies and legations across the world. We have the best foreign service in the world, but it needs proper financing and support.

T4. [900331] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary has spoken in the past about his ardent opposition to female genital mutilation. Will he therefore have a word with the Home Secretary, who is yet to respond to me and my constituent Lola Illesanmi? She is threatened with deportation and her child faces mutilation. I raised her case with the Prime Minister but have yet to receive an answer.

Boris Johnson: I think I heard the hon. Lady raise this matter before. The case of her constituent is, indeed, very troubling. I am sure that the Home Secretary will have picked up what the hon. Lady has said today.

T3. [900330] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I welcome the part played by British forces in stabilising the threat posed by Daesh. What role does my right hon. Friend see for British forces in ensuring that such an insurgency does not recur?

Boris Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for a really excellent question. It is one thing for us to drive Daesh out of Mosul and Raqqa, but we must ensure that the reasons it sprouted in those cities do not recur and that the Sunni minority in Iraq have conditions of governance that give them confidence in the future of their country.

T5. [900332] **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Not since the Suez crisis have the United Kingdom Government been so comprehensively defeated at the United Nations as they were last week over the Chagos Islands. In this week's spirit of bipartisan co-operation, should the Foreign Secretary not just grant the right of return?

Boris Johnson: I respectfully disagree with the hon. Gentleman. In point of fact, we secured rather more positive votes than we expected. As it happens, the other side of the case got fewer than half the members of the UN in support of its cause. Most impartial observers would agree that that side of the case had been substantially weakened as a result—not that it was a strong case to begin with.

T10. [900337] **Andrew Percy** (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said last week that he would continue paying prisoner salaries, even to people who have murdered innocent civilians, if it cost him his job. Does the Minister agree that there is no way in which there will be peace in the middle east without co-existence projects and support for co-existence on the Palestinian side?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): My hon. Friend is right: there are a number of barriers on the Palestinian side to being able to make progress, including support for incitement and terror. The Department for International Development is looking extremely carefully to ensure that no payments go in the wrong direction. It is certainly true that the Palestinian Authority needs to look very hard at ensuring that it is not giving the wrong signals as we try to make progress on the middle east peace process.

T6. [900333] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): We are having Foreign Office questions, and still my constituent Ray Tindall and the other men of the Chennai Six are incarcerated in India. Will the Secretary of State pick up the phone to his opposite number in India and do a deal to get the men deported so that Ray and I can have a pint in Chester before the summer is out?

Boris Johnson: I appreciate the persistence with which the hon. Gentleman campaigns for his constituents. He has raised this issue with me several times. As he would like, I have personally raised the matter repeatedly with my Indian counterparts. They have told me that they cannot interfere in their court system any more than we can interfere in our own. That is where the matter currently stands, but I assure him that we continue to raise it on his behalf and on behalf of his constituents.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): It is striking that Commonwealth countries trade 25% more with each other at a cost that is 90% lower than with non-Commonwealth countries. Does the Minister agree that, as we leave the EU, we have a great opportunity to

boost our mutual trade and security interests by enhancing our diplomatic relations with Ghana and other Commonwealth countries?

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is our trade envoy to Ghana. Ghana is one of the most impressive recent developments in Africa, with three recent transitions of democratic power and a rapidly growing economy. It is a huge example of how the Commonwealth can become one of the great success stories of Britain's next five years, as we move towards the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

T8. [900335] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The Paralympic games in Rio were a great success, showcasing inspirational talent and the importance of sports inclusion worldwide. What discussions has the Foreign Office had with Japanese counterparts to lend our full support to the Tokyo Paralympic games?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She can rest assured that a huge amount of work is going on, partly on the security side, with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security, but there is also, very importantly, as she rightly says, the sheer organisation. We are working closely to make sure there is seamless progress between 2012 and 2020, albeit that we have had Rio in the meantime. I think the Paralympic games in Tokyo are going to be a great success.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In the next few weeks, the House of Representatives Government from Benghazi in Libya are coming to visit the UK. Would my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary or any of his colleagues on the Front Bench like to meet them, because they are playing a pivotal role in trying to keep peace in Libya?

Alistair Burt: An expansion of the Libyan political agreement is necessary to move matters along. There is a lot happening on the political and the business side in Libya as it gets back on its feet. I would be happy to meet those whom my hon. Friend wants to bring forward.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given the collapse of the talks in Cyprus and the fact that the Government remain a guarantor of the process, what are they going to do now?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Very sadly, the Cyprus talks, on which people had done so much work for over two years, collapsed in the early hours of Friday morning in Crans-Montana, near Geneva. This was a once-in-a-generation chance to reunify the island; sadly, it has been missed and rejected, so we go back to the status quo ante. It is an enormous pity—indeed, a tragedy—for future generations that agreement was not reached.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): In view of the continuing concerns about human rights in Hong Kong, does my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary intend to make any further representations on the joint declaration?

Mark Field: I hope my hon. Friend will be assured that the UK has been very active in emphasising the significance of the Sino-British joint declaration—a legally binding treaty registered with the UN that continues to be in force today. During my meeting with the Chinese ambassador on 5 July, I stressed the UK's strong commitment to that joint declaration. We urge the Chinese and the Hong Kong special administration Governments and all elected politicians in Hong Kong to refrain from any actions that fuel concerns or undermine confidence in the one country, two systems principle.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has rightly underlined the importance of US-UK relations in this new world, but that relationship is kept alive by cultural and exchange programmes such as the Fulbright programme, which is now imperilled by President Trump's proposal to cut 47% from its budget. Will the Foreign Secretary make representations to underline the fact that we think programmes such as Fulbright should be expanded and not pushed to the point of extinction?

Sir Alan Duncan: I stand here as a Kennedy scholar, which is a very similar structure, and we have a fantastic programme of Chevening scholars sponsored by the Foreign Office. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has confirmed that he will raise the Fulbright scholarships with Secretary Tillerson when he next sees him.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): With 250,000 people from Burundi now refugees as a result of the repression and human rights abuses in that country, what is the Foreign Secretary doing to stimulate dialogue to resolve the political impasse there?

Rory Stewart: The situation in Burundi is very disturbing. We call, above all, on the Burundian President to respect the Arusha accords and to give proper space to the former Tanzanian Prime Minister in leading the peace talks. In Burundi, as in so many countries in the world, the only long-term solution is a political solution to a humanitarian crisis.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Foreign Secretary meet the members of the all-party group for friends of Syria to discuss the desperate need to get more aid to the hundreds of thousands being starved to death by al-Assad in Syria?

Boris Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his persistence in pursuing this cause. He is absolutely right, and we have spoken across this Chamber many times about the humanitarian crisis in Syria. I will have great pleasure in meeting the Syria group to discuss what the UK is doing, but the House will know that this country is the second biggest contributor of humanitarian relief aid to Syria in the world.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): While I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister raised the issue of the Chennai Six with Mr Modi at the G20, may I urge my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to focus his

efforts on the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and to seek an urgent meeting with her? Our boys have been languishing in jail there for almost four years—I visited them myself—and it is time, frankly, that they were brought home.

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He suggests an interesting avenue for further work. I will certainly look at the possibility of talking to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Whether we will be any more successful with her in making our points, I will ascertain, but we will leave no stone unturned.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Last week, at the same time as representatives of 57 Parliaments were meeting in Minsk to discuss co-operation on human rights issues, the Belarusian authorities were convicting a human rights activist on charges on which defence witnesses were not allowed to testify. The defendant was taken to hospital during the trial and convicted in his absence. What action are the Government taking to make sure that the authorities in Belarus recognise the absolute right of anyone to a fair trial?

Sir Alan Duncan: The most important thing we can do is to enhance our bilateral relations by visiting. No Minister has visited Belarus for many, many years, if at all, and I intend to do so at the earliest opportunity.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): As well as the physical rebuilding of Mosul, one of the ways to reassure the people of Mosul is to devolve power to them, for which the Iraqi constitution allows. Will the Foreign Secretary urge the Iraqi Administration to look seriously at devolving power to the people of Mosul?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is of course right. Iraq is an ethnically divided and religiously divided country. We must make sure that everybody feels properly represented in the new constitution, and devolution to Mosul is certainly an option that we will be exploring.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), before the Foreign Secretary meets the all-party friends of Syria group, will he discuss a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence so that we can have a proper joined-up strategy at last?

Boris Johnson: I can tell the hon. Lady that that is already happening.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Foreign Secretary. I recognise that there is still unsatisfied demand, but not as much as there might have been if I had not overrun, which I was pleased to do. I am sure that the Foreign Secretary was equally enthusiastic.

Taylor Review: Working Practices

12.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the independent review of modern working practices which was led by Matthew Taylor and published earlier today.

The review sets out that British business is successful at creating jobs, enhancing earning power, and improving life chances across the UK. Employment rates are the highest since records began. Unemployment and economic inactivity are at record lows. More people are in work than ever before, and minimum wage rates have never been higher. This is a story of success that this Government will seek to sustain.

The UK economy's continued success is built on the flexibility of our labour market, which benefits both workers and business. Businesses can create jobs and individuals can find work because our labour market regulation balances the demands of both. Minimum standards set a baseline beyond which there is flexibility to set arrangements to suit all parties. Our dynamic approach responds well to fluctuations in the economic cycle, without the structural weaknesses present in some other countries. It is important that we preserve this success but also enhance it further. While the majority of people employed in the UK are in full-time, permanent employment, globalisation, demographics and especially technology are changing the way in which we work. We need to make sure the British labour market stays strong and everyone in the UK benefits from it.

That is why last year the Prime Minister asked Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the Royal Society of Arts, to lead an independent review into employment practices in the modern economy. That review has now been published, and I am delighted to lay a copy in the House Library today. It is a thorough and detailed piece of work for which I am very grateful, not only to Matthew and his panel members but to the numerous businesses, trade unions, organisations and individuals who have provided their views on this very important topic.

The review has a strong, overarching ambition that all work in the UK should be fair and decent, with realistic scope for fulfilment and progression. Matthew has outlined seven principles to meeting that ambition. I urge hon. Members to examine those principles and the rest of the report in detail, since it is an important contribution to a crucial subject.

In summary, those principles are that our national strategy for work should be explicitly directed towards the goal of good work for all; that platform-based working offers welcome opportunities for genuine flexibility, but there should be greater distinction between workers—or, as the review suggests renaming them, “dependent contractors”—and those who are fully self-employed; that there should be additional protections for that group and stronger incentives for firms to treat them fairly; that the best way to achieve better work is through good corporate governance, good management and strong employment relations; that it is vital that individuals have realistically attainable ways to strengthen their future work prospects; that there should be a more

proactive approach to workplace health; and that the national living wage is a powerful tool to raise the financial baseline of low-paid workers, but it needs to be accompanied by sectoral strategies, engaging employers, employees and stakeholders to raise prospects further.

This is an independent review addressed to Government. Although we may not ultimately accept every recommendation in full, I am determined that we consider the report very carefully and we will respond fully by the end of the year.

Matthew Taylor has been clear: the UK labour market is a success—the “British way” works. He has also said, however, that there are instances where it is not working fairly for everyone. For example, he highlights where our legislation needs updating or where flexibility seems to work only one way, to the benefit of the employer. We recognise the points made. We accept that as a country we now need to focus as much on the quality of the working experience, especially for those in lower-paid roles, as on the number of jobs we create, vital though that is.

This Government have made a commitment to upholding workers' rights. The Prime Minister has said repeatedly, in this House and elsewhere, that as we leave the EU there will be no roll-back of employment protections. The Queen's Speech also set out that this Government will go further than that and seek to enhance rights and protections in the modern workplace. Today's publication of the “Good Work” review, and the public consideration of Matthew's recommendations that will follow, will help to inform the development of our industrial strategy this autumn. I commend this statement to the House.

12.42 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): When the Prime Minister took office last year, she stood on the steps of Downing Street stating that she was on the side of working people. Despite that rhetoric, the Conservatives have been in government for seven years and in that time have done very little for working people. They have presided over a lost decade of productivity growth. They have implemented the pernicious Trade Union Act 2016, which is, frankly, an ideological attack on the trade union movement, curbing its ability to fight for and represent workers' interests. They have inflicted hardship on public sector workers with a pay cap that was confirmed for yet another year by the Department for Education yesterday. They promised workers on boards, but rowed back scared when powerful interests said that they were not particularly keen on the idea. And they introduced employment tribunal fees, which have made it much harder for workers to enforce their rights.

Today's publication of the Taylor review was a real opportunity to overhaul the existing employment system in a way that would protect workers in a rapidly changing world of work. But, in the words of the general secretary of Unite, the biggest union in the UK:

“Instead of the serious programme the country urgently needs to ensure that once again work pays in this country...we got a depressing sense that insecurity is the inevitable new norm.”

Indeed, the Minister confirmed that she might not even accept all the proposals in the Taylor report, in any event.

Although the report is positive in sentiment in many areas, it misses many opportunities to clamp down on exploitation in the workplace. I do not have time to cover them all today, but I have specific concerns that the report may allow the Government to interpret references to the so-called dependent contractor in such a way as to allow them to row back on recent court victories for workers such as Uber drivers and those who work for Pimlico Plumbers.

Recent case law has suggested that a worker on a platform should be entitled to the minimum wage as long as the app is switched on and they are ready and willing to accept trips. However, the review suggests that the platform may insist on payment by piece rate, such that only an average driver, working averagely hard, will earn 1.2 times the minimum wage. That raises issues of enforcement and regulation—what constitutes a reasonable piece rate across platforms?—and it is something of a retreat from the common law position. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will not undermine workers' rights on the minimum wage in that way? Founder of Pimlico Plumbers and Conservative donor Charlie Mullins said this morning that the report holds Pimlico Plumbers up as an example of “best practice in the gig economy.”

This is a company that our judicial system has found to be an example of worst practice.

The report does very little to strengthen the enforcement of workers' existing rights. Although Taylor agrees with Labour's position on shifting the burden of proof to employers in determining self-employed status, the report does little else in that area, and it needs much more work. There is, for example, no movement at all on employment tribunal fees, which are a barrier to justice for many workers.

If the Prime Minister wanted ideas on strengthening workers' rights, she could just have come to us. Just four of our manifesto commitments would go a long way to ending the scourge of exploitation in the gig economy: giving all workers equal rights from day one; strengthening the enforcement of those rights by beefing up and better resourcing Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, rather than imposing pernicious cuts, and by allowing trade unions access to every workplace; abolishing employment tribunal fees; and fining employers who breach labour market rights and regulations.

In the spirit of the so-called collaboration that the Prime Minister is so desperately seeking, will the Minister commit today to implementing those four simple measures, as a start? If not, will she accept that the Conservative party is not, and never will be, on the side of working people?

Margot James: I am glad that the hon. Lady found some positive aspects in the report on which to compliment Matthew Taylor. I appreciate that she will not have had time to read it all yet, but I urge her to do so. It contains many recommendations that will be of benefit to workers and are worthy of the greater consideration that the Government will give them.

I will not comment on each of the recommendations that the hon. Lady raised, because they are Matthew Taylor's suggestions and, as I have said, they will be given due consideration. She criticised the Government's record, so I would like to remind her that this Government

have introduced the national living wage and presided over the minimum wage reaching its highest rate, in real terms, since its introduction. The wage increases in the last year have been highest among the lowest paid, thanks to the national living wage. We have nearly doubled the budget for the enforcement of the national living wage. We have doubled fines for companies that underpay their employees. We have banned the use of exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts. We have done all that against the backdrop of protecting the growth in employment, which is, at almost 75%, at its highest level since records began.

Our record is one of achievement. The hon. Lady criticises us for enacting the Trade Union Act 2016, but most reasonable people would not criticise the idea that workers who are members of trade unions should have a proper say when their union decides to take strike action. That is the primary purpose of the legislation.

It is not all a garden of roses, otherwise the Prime Minister would not have requested Matthew Taylor to undertake the report. The Prime Minister said, when she announced Matthew Taylor's investigation, that flexibility and innovation are vital parts of what make our economy strong, but it is essential that those virtues are combined with the right support and protections for workers. The Taylor review came to understand that flexibility does work for many people, and it is clear that an agile labour market is good for protecting employment.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that productivity is at the heart of boosting wages for lower-paid workers? There are some really good examples of employers, working with the Living Wage Foundation and others, who have managed to boost the pay of lower-skilled workers by focusing on productivity, and that should be at the heart of this issue.

Margot James: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Productivity is central to our industrial strategy. We have established a £23 billion fund to promote quality jobs, better skills and the higher pay that is, as he says, so important.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my trade union activity over the 20 years before my election.

Today's response to the Taylor review from the Government tells us everything we need to know about their frailty and approach to workers' rights—a weak set of proposals that probably will not be implemented and a set of talking points that leaves the balance of power with employers and big business. It was interesting that neither the Prime Minister nor the Minister mentioned or commended the role of the trade unions in securing fair rights at work. Does the Minister agree that a “right to request” is different from a fundamental right enshrined in law? If a request is refused, what enforcement action will the Government take to force employers to do better?

Does the Minister accept that the report makes no distinction between a flexible workforce and the exploitation of that workforce? Does she also agree that while the Taylor report tries to propose new rights, some of those rights have been secured by trade unions taking employers to court, as the shadow Minister suggested? Can the

[*Chris Stephens*]

Minister tell us what action the Government will take to enforce minimum wage payments when 200,000 workers in the UK are not paid the minimum wage? Will the Government advertise rights at work services, such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and does the Minister agree that it is time for a fair rights at work Act to guarantee fundamental rights at work?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his critique. The “right to request” has been useful and valuable when it comes to requesting flexible employment. In any case, it is a recommendation that Matthew made, but it certainly warrants careful consideration. The hon. Gentleman mentions enforcement, and we are committed to making sure that workers on zero-hours contracts or the minimum wage get paid what they are legally entitled to be paid. That is why we have doubled the resources available to HMRC in the last two years to ensure enforcement of those important laws.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome Matthew Taylor’s report today and commend the Minister for her statement, especially on tackling maternity and pregnancy discrimination, which the report says has doubled in the last decade and needs more action. Will the Minister outline what provisions in the report address the issues raised by the Women and Equalities Committee about workers’ lack of rights to access antenatal care during the working day, which the Minister—in her response to the Committee’s report—indicated would be addressed through the Taylor report?

Margot James: I commend my right hon. Friend for the work that the Committee, which she chaired, has done to tackle the outrageous discrimination against pregnant women, which has no place in the modern workplace. There are provisions in the Taylor report, but work is ongoing across Government to improve the opportunities for pregnant women in the workplace to ensure that we make history of such discrimination.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): As someone who lobbied the Prime Minister with reports on the gig economy to establish such an inquiry, may I thank the Minister for her statement today? May I tease from her a little more about the Government’s position on the trade-off between minimum standards at the vulnerable end of the labour market and flexibility? If the news reports are right, Matthew Taylor goes for flexibility rather than always implementing the national minimum wage. May we have an undertaking from the Government that they will always abide by the national minimum wage, even if that means a loss in flexibility?

Margot James: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on all the work he did on these matters in chairing the Work and Pensions Committee in the last Parliament. I can assure him that minimum wages rates are sacrosanct. There will be no trade-off when it comes to ensuring that everybody is paid at least the minimum wage. When he reads the report, he will be more encouraged. Many of the people who attended the Taylor review’s evidence sessions said that they liked the flexibility of working atypically and that we should not lose that, but that flexibility should not be a one-way street with

individuals absorbing all the risk. Although we will consider the recommendations further, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I very much agree with those sentiments.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the Minister welcome the fact that the review established that the majority of employers follow good practice, and agree that our focus should be on those who do not to ensure that we level the playing field for all employers, all employees and all businesses?

Margot James: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend. Employers who choose to break the rules—they are a small minority, but they exist—must expect consequences for their actions. The vast majority of businesses behave properly towards their employees, and they must not find themselves at the wrong end of an uneven playing field.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I declare an interest having done some work with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development during my time outwith the House.

I welcome the Prime Minister saying that there will be no roll-back of workers’ rights, but let me just say that those words are rather a departure from my experience of the Conservative position when I was Liberal Democrat Minister for employment relations in the coalition. I know that the Minister is genuine on this important issue, and it is a thoughtful report of more than 150 pages. As she prepares the Government’s response to the report, will she commit to consulting widely across the House through debates and speaking to the Select Committees on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, on Work and Pensions, and on Women and Equalities, to get the right response?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and commend her for her role in the coalition Government. I am glad that she acknowledges that the Government have moved forward in their appreciation of the difficulties faced by certain workers in the areas on which Matthew Taylor has focused. I can give her every assurance that we will indeed consult widely not only with industry, trade unions and members of the public, but across the House.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the report. At this early stage, can my hon. Friend give any indication as to what enhanced opportunities may be created for people with disabilities who are in the world of work or trying to enter it? They are a very important part of our constituency.

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. The Department for Work and Pensions is undertaking various measures to improve the chances of people with disabilities accessing the workplace, and my Department is giving all the support it can to that inquiry.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Matthew Taylor said today that he wants employers to pay national insurance for people with whom they have a controlling and supervisory relationship. Do the Government plan to implement that aspect of the Taylor review, and can

the Minister reassure workers that the Government do not plan to U-turn on their U-turn and increase national insurance for the genuinely self-employed?

Margot James: I can assure the hon. Lady that, as the First Secretary of State said earlier this week, Parliament has spoken on the issue of national insurance class 4 contributions. That matter is now settled, and will not be revisited. I agree with her that we should pay close attention to ensure that people who are genuinely contracted to provide an ongoing service are given the protections that workers enjoy, and are not falsely labelled as self-employed.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): On a similar point, will my hon. Friend confirm that there is a real risk that introducing the term “dependent contractors” will fudge the issue of whether someone is really employed or self-employed? Should we not focus on ensuring that the line is drawn in the right place and that those who engage so-called dependent contractors are paying employers’ national insurance, so that our own tax regime does not distort the market?

Margot James: We will certainly consult carefully on those points. We will make sure not only that the Treasury is satisfied in respect of tax issues, but that we are satisfied that people are getting their rights if they are employees or workers—or, as Matthew Taylor is proposing to rename them, dependent contractors.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister has welcomed the report. Is she in a position to accept any of its specific recommendations today? Can she tell us when there will be legislation to implement at least something in it, or is this all going to be batted off into the long grass?

Margot James: As I said earlier, we will look at and consult on every single recommendation, but at this very early stage it is not really for me to say which I am personally inclined to recommend accepting and which I am not. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will bear with us. Over the next six months—well, I said by the year end; it might be a little longer than six months—we will consult widely across the House, and the right hon. Gentleman will have every opportunity to make his views known.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I spent 45 years in the gig economy, and what I liked about it was that it was very flexible. In order to build a career, I found myself delivering bacon across north London from Smithfield market. I also became a removal man, among many other things. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is welcome that the report supports a flexible labour market, and is not in favour of restricting that flexibility when individuals want it?

Margot James: I think my hon. Friend has read the summary of Matthew Taylor’s report very carefully because he understands that balance. He does not want us to end the flexibilities that have helped him in his career and close them off for people who are starting out on their careers now. As I have said, however, we must of course ensure that protections are in place.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just my constituents who are part of the gig economy who do not have security. Many of my constituents have jobs in which they work 15 hours a week. They are pleased and proud to be working, but when they want full-time employment they instead see more people in the same organisations being given part-time hours. When will the Government get to grips with that element of the economy, and ensure that all those workers have a fair deal and the chance to work the full-time hours that they want so much?

Margot James: The whole basis of the report is good work and the aspiration of good work for all, including, I believe, the constituents to whom the hon. Lady refers, but let me reassure her. Two years ago, the Office for National Statistics labour force survey found that nearly 70% of people on zero-hours contracts were content with the hours that they were working. However, that does mean that a third want more hours, which is a finding that we must embrace in the context of some of the changes that Matthew Taylor is recommending to help to achieve the good work and the working hours that the hon. Lady’s constituents want.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I, too, welcome the report. Does my hon. Friend agree that flexibility in the labour market benefits workers and employers equally?

Margot James: My hon. Friend asks me a difficult question. I do believe—Matthew Taylor’s report bears this out—that flexibility benefits employers and employees, but I am afraid that the evidence given to the inquiry suggested that in too many cases that flexibility is a one-way street, as I said earlier. We must deal with the problem of people who are really at risk and whose employment position is far too insecure.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s commitment to the Government’s upholding of workers’ rights, but as part of the Government’s response to the report, will she consider enabling workers to uphold their own rights? Will she look again at the fees for employment tribunals, which have led to a 70% reduction in cases brought by single claimants, such as those working in the gig economy, against their employers?

Margot James: The hon. Lady makes an important point, but it is really a matter for the Ministry of Justice. Matthew Taylor has not actually recommended that we get rid of fees for employment tribunals, and I think we should recognise the positive aspect: the upsurge in the number of employment disputes that have been settled through mediation. However, I will continue to look at the issue that the hon. Lady raises.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The report praises and supports flexibility in the labour market, where individuals want it. Does my hon. Friend agree that it may be especially, but not exclusively, beneficial to students and young people?

Margot James: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The figures suggest that nearly 20% of people on zero-hours contracts are students. Such flexibility also benefits many people who have parenting or caring responsibilities

[Margot James]

and do not want to work full-time. We certainly do not want to end that flexibility but, as I have said, we do want to improve protection.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The gig economy brings insecure work. Insecure work demands new rights, but those rights will be worthless unless the Government are prepared to put more resources into enforcement, regulation and inspection. Will the Minister commit herself to providing those additional resources when implementing the Taylor review?

Margot James: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman that enforcement is crucial. As I said, we have doubled the resources available to HMRC for enforcing the minimum wage and they will continue to rise throughout this Parliament. We have also strengthened the powers of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, and the recently appointed director of labour market enforcement has been tasked with bringing the work of the three major enforcement bodies together to understand the extent of the abuse and to recommend ways of giving those agencies the resources that will enable them to deal with it. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be pleased with the outcome, in due course.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I welcome the report and my hon. Friend's statement. Does she agree that not only is it absolutely right for us to ensure that workers are treated fairly, but it is good for businesses too, because they will have a more engaged and therefore more productive workforce?

Margot James: I heartily agree. This is all about improving work so that we have good work, with people who are able to grow in their careers, and a system in which those who are low-paid to start with need not be low-paid forever but can aspire to a better future. That will benefit British productivity and, as my hon. Friend suggests, improve the competitiveness of British companies.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Vital protection for all workers is provided by trade union membership and by trade union recognition. Since my time at the TUC more than 40 years ago, trade union membership in Britain has halved, while workers' and trade union rights have been undermined by Tory legislation. When will the Government reverse that legislation?

Margot James: The Government cannot mandate people to join trade unions. Trade unions are still an important force for the protection of workers' rights among the sectors of the economy in which they are still dominant, and I commend them for their work.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): If one talks to drivers for Uber or cleaners using platforms such as Hassle, they will largely acknowledge the benefits of flexibility to them. To coin a phrase, would it not be morally unacceptable to misread the 21st-century labour market and construct a set of rules that forced those people out of work, rather than allowing them to stay in it?

Margot James: My hon. Friend will no doubt be pleased that Matthew Taylor very much agrees with his thesis.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Over 1 million workers are being exploited by sham umbrella companies and bogus self-employment. Changes to tax policy are what is needed to tackle that, but the Government prohibited Matthew Taylor from making any firm recommendations on changing tax policy, so how seriously can we take the Minister's comments today, and when on earth are the Government going to eventually address these tax anomalies?

Margot James: I assure the hon. Lady that no bar was put in front of Matthew Taylor; he was able to investigate as freely and as fairly as he saw fit. It is up to the Treasury to assess the tax situation and any potential loss of revenue, which of course arises due to bogus self-employment.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): To contrast the previous question, will my hon. Friend join me in recognising one of the key findings of the review: thanks to the Government's tax policies, once tax levels and tax credits are taken into account, average take-home pay for families with at least one member in full-time employment is higher in the UK than in any other G7 country?

Margot James: I commend my hon. Friend for bringing that important fact to the notice of the House.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to hear the Minister promoting this Marxist revolution that we are now living through, as the means of production are increasingly in the hands of the workers. Further to what she has just said, does she agree that the answer to some of the challenges is not just better regulations, but helping people to organise? If so, will she meet me, the Community trade union, the co-op movement and Indycube to discuss our work helping the self-employed to organise and unionise?

Margot James: I am aware of the independent union of self-employed workers; it has been a force and has contributed to the inquiry. However, I will be only too pleased to meet the hon. Lady and her Community organisers as part of my consultation.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): There is a marked difference between people who set up a business and take risks, including the risk of self-employment, and a few unscrupulous employers who force workers to go self-employed. In response to this excellent report, what will my hon. Friend do to ensure that people who are genuinely self-employed continue to receive benefits, but the unscrupulous employers do not?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We do not want to stand in the way of the incentives for people who genuinely take a risk by starting a business. They are the majority, and we do not want to do anything that upsets that balance. At the same time, as my hon. Friend will realise, we need to end the scourge of fake self-employment.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Disappointingly, the report does not go far enough on the issue of zero-hours contracts. The Labour Welsh Government have failed to support the prohibition of zero-hours contracts in devolved areas on seven occasions. Is it not the case that vulnerable workers in Wales are being let down by both the Tories and the Labour party?

Margot James: As I have said, many individuals want to work in the flexible way that is afforded by zero-hours contracts, and almost 70% of people on those contracts are happy with their hours. As I have also said, we must take steps to promote the value of good work as an opportunity for the third who are not, whether they are in Wales or the rest of the United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister tells us that 20% of such people are students and that 70% are satisfied. Can she complete the hat-trick by telling us what the mean weekly earnings for someone on a zero-hours contract actually are?

Margot James: I am afraid I will have to write to my right hon. Friend with that answer.

Mr Speaker: Put a copy in the Library; I am sure it will be of educational value to all of us.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Matthew Taylor writes in his report:

“We must equip our children and young people to enter the labour market successfully, but Government, employers and individuals also need to make sure everyone is best placed to thrive throughout what might be a working life spanning 50 years or more.”

How do the Government square that with the previous Prime Minister’s policy of stopping compulsory work experience in schools, which in its first year led to a drop of 60,000 work experience placements in our schools across the country? Will she look at that again?

Margot James: That is a matter for the Department for Education. I agree that work experience is very important to young people and I am sure the Secretary of State will look favourably on that. My Department is looking to boost opportunities for lifelong learning to engender a culture in which people can progress in their careers.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Before I became a Member of Parliament, I was self-employed for almost 30 years. I was also the self-employment ambassador to the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, and I worked with Matthew Taylor on this report. I found him to be extremely non-partisan and an absolute gentleman. May I urge my hon. Friend to accept the proposed measures for the self-employed, especially the maternity and paternity benefits?

Margot James: I will certainly take on board my hon. Friend’s views, which are based on many years’ experience. I thank him for his contribution to the report.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): We have flexibility in the labour market on one side of the coin, but insecurity for people in employment on the other. There has been criticism, for instance from Unite the union this morning,

that insecurity is to be the new norm, and we want to avoid that. Will the Minister think about reversing the coalition’s decision to extend from one year to two the protection of employment threshold?

Margot James: I do not accept the premise that insecurity is the new norm. One of the purposes of this report was to look closely at the extent of insecurity and to produce recommendations on how that might be mitigated when it is not desired by the workers. I will consider the question that the hon. Gentleman raises, but it was not addressed in this report.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Speaking at the launch this morning, Mr Taylor suggested that traditional cash-economy workers such as window cleaners could use an app to collect money and declare directly to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, so why does Uber, which has the most cutting-edge, fully automated app, not seem to declare the payments it makes to drivers directly to HMRC or to collect the national insurance numbers of drivers? Will the Minister strongly suggest that it does so?

Margot James: The app was one of the most interesting suggestions. There might be limitations to the apps currently available, but in no way was Matthew Taylor advocating that these should be mandatory. They should, however, be available in a more sophisticated form than at present.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): As the Government look towards this gig economy, will they consider Matthew Taylor’s remarks that:

“Our welfare system is a cruel mess”?

On universal credit, he said that

“no one outside Government thinks it will make the system fairer...There is a better way. A universal basic income...can improve incentives and rewards for work, increase human freedom and dignity”.

Will the Government consider his conclusions?

Margot James: That matter has not been addressed by the report. I urge the hon. Gentleman to address his questions to Work and Pensions Ministers.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Matthew Taylor urges the Government to consider reducing tribunal fees. May I urge the Minister to go further, particularly in relation to pregnancy discrimination? Get on with abolishing them, and extend the period during which a case can be brought before a tribunal, because a period of pregnancy and maternity is a busy time when people are unlikely to be thinking about a court case.

Margot James: I agree with the hon. Lady’s concluding remarks and hope she will input her views as part of the consultation.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Minister has twice referred to the fact that flexibility seems to work only one way—to the benefit of the employer. Does that flexibility include her Government’s failure to prosecute a single employer in Wales last year for flouting the minimum wage rules?

Margot James: To correct the record, I was not saying that flexibility was always a one-way street in favour of the employer; I said that this was, in exceptional cases, a real problem that needs addressing, but that is not necessarily the norm. In response to the other matters the hon. Lady has raised, I urge her to contribute her views as we go through the consultation.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): When the Minister is considering how to respond to the review, will she talk to her colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about the youth full-time social action review, which is considering the question of long-time volunteering? I realise that these are slightly different issues, but there is still a considerable overlap. The question of safeguards and protections is the same in some cases, so it seems sensible to wrap the two together.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman makes good points about volunteering and the framework that governs it, and I hope that he will make them during our consultation.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I want to ask the Minister two quick questions. First, on the extension of workforce protections, will that include secondary contractors? For instance, if one person in a team of three or four is the main contractor, will dependent contractor status be extended to other people in the team? Secondly, while being a dependent contractor might provide a minor uplift for people who are self-employed, does the Minister agree that some employers will see this as an opportunity to downgrade people with employment protection to the status of dependent contractor against their will?

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues. There is no intention to downgrade anybody's rights. We want to be in a position to safeguard people's rights and, when possible, improve them—we certainly do not want to downgrade them. I am sure that he will put his detailed observations into our consultation.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): This Government continue to justify the existence of zero-hours contracts on the basis of flexibility, but the problems could largely be addressed if flexible working could be properly expanded and given a framework so that we knew exactly what it meant. Will the Government use this opportunity to properly expand flexible working and explain what it actually means?

Margot James: I cannot accept the premise behind the hon. Gentleman's question. We are not seeking to end zero-hours contracts, because too many people want them and the flexibility associated with them, but we are seeking to root out abuse where it exists.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Taylor review recommends that the Government should make it easier for people in flexible arrangements to take their holiday entitlement. In the past, the Minister has struggled to explain the Government's powers in this area. Will she tell us what powers currently exist to enforce the payment of holiday pay and, with the summer fast approaching, will she act on the Taylor report's recommendations swiftly?

Margot James: I can reassure the hon. Lady that Matthew Taylor has recommended that we take the issue of holiday pay seriously and ensure that it applies to all workers who are entitled to it. The Treasury will be taking forward those suggestions.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that the transfer of risk is at the heart of the problem. Drivers at AO World in my constituency are classified as self-employed but treated as employees without rights. Is there anything in the Taylor report that would end the practice of fining drivers every time there is an accident?

Margot James: Perhaps the hon. Lady would like to write to me with more details because this is the first time I have heard of that particular practice. It certainly sounds wrong, and I would be delighted to consider it further within the powers that currently exist.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Page 11 of Mr Taylor's report says:

"we have to examine why, with employment levels at record highs, a significant number of people living in poverty are in work." For as long as I have been here, when Members have asked questions about poverty, it has been the Government's practice to respond with statistics about employment and unemployment. Will they now finally accept that such a thing as in-work poverty not only exists, but is a brutal fact of life for millions of people on these islands?

Margot James: We have always been absolutely committed to reducing poverty, wherever it exists. The national living wage has gone a long way towards providing workers with a framework so that they need not sink into poverty, and I urge the hon. Gentleman to consider that fact further.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As someone who has done a few gigs in his time, may I urge the Minister to reject the execrable think-tankery jargon of the term "dependent contractor"? Work is work, and workers are workers. "Dependent contractors of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains," is not going to change anything.

Margot James rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. For those new Members of the House who are not aware of the musical distinction of the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), I can inform them that he is an illustrious member of the parliamentary rock band, MP4. If colleagues have not yet heard the band, they have not fully lived. I hope that they will hear the band in due course, preferably in Speaker's House, where it has played before and will play again.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman refers to the term "dependent contractor". This recommendation was designed to improve clarity and to increase the chances of workers getting the rights to which they are entitled, but it is just that: a recommendation. He is free to lobby against our acceptance of it during the course of our consultation.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I welcome the report's acknowledgement that employment tribunal fees are a barrier to justice. The recommendation of fee-free tribunals to establish employment status is positive, but what can be done to ensure the quality of representation at the tribunals? What protection will there be to prevent the detrimental treatment of someone bringing a claim? Is it also the case that, once someone's status has been determined, a fee will still have to be paid?

Margot James: One of Matthew Taylor's recommendations is that before an employee takes a case to an employment tribunal, they should receive firm advice on what their status is in reality. That would end a huge amount of uncertainty and unnecessary expense. We will consider that and all the other recommendations in this excellent report, which I commend to the House. I found much of it inspiring, and I hope that we can all work together to improve the quality of work in this country, as well as the number of jobs.

Points of Order

1.26 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order for a Minister to attend the House and make a statement on why there is no one authority with responsibility for the safety of rivers and canals? Last night, my 12-year-old constituent Owen Jenkins drowned at Beeston weir. It appears that he went into the River Trent to assist another youngster who had got into difficulty in the water. This seems to have been an act of great courage by a remarkable young man, and I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending our heartfelt condolences to his family, his friends and all the other pupils at Chilwell School. Summer is here and the schools are now breaking up for the holidays. Our rivers, canals, quarries, ponds and lakes are potentially dangerous places, especially for children and youngsters, yet there is no one authority that has responsibility for safety in those areas. I think that a Minister should come along to the House and explain how we can ensure that all those places are safe for all of us, and especially for young people.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order, and for her courtesy in giving me notice of her intention to raise it. She has paid warm and eloquent tribute to young Owen Jenkins, and I am sure she speaks for all of us in saying that we send our deepest condolences to all his friends and family. We shall remember the remarkable courage that he showed. I am not aware of the intention on the part of any Minister to come to the House to make a statement on this matter, but the right hon. Lady asked whether it would be in order for a Minister to do so. It certainly would, and we still have several sitting days before the recess. If a Minister were to come to the House to make a statement on that matter, to explain the delineation of functions and the allocation of responsibilities and to answer questions about this, that would be very well received by the House and, I dare say, by the family of young Owen Jenkins.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that the Prime Minister has announced that there is to be a judge-led public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal. Would it not have been better if, just for once, such an announcement could have been made to hon. Members in this House?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that it is better if key announcements of policy or other Government intent are communicated first to the House when the House is in session. I have been attending to my duties in the Chair, so I am unaware of the announcement. It may well be that it will be warmly welcomed, and I do not cavil at that, but the hon. Gentleman asked me a specific question, to which I have given him a specific answer.

Yesterday, when the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) sought leave to secure an emergency debate on a specific and important matter, namely her sense of the need for a full public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, there had obviously been no such announcement. I judge that it was indeed a proper matter to be debated under the

[*Mr Speaker*]

terms of Standing Order No. 24. Notwithstanding any announcement outside of the House, an indication of parliamentary opinion on the subject remains extremely germane and arguably just as urgent. I agreed to it yesterday but, more particularly, the House gave its approval to the hon. Lady to pursue this matter, and I felt and still feel that it warranted and warrants up to three hours of debate today. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), but the announcement certainly does not in any way dissuade us from a proper and comprehensive focus on this matter now.

Contaminated Blood

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.31 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the need for an independent public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal.

May I first thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this emergency debate? This is the first such debate on the contaminated blood scandal, and it arises, as you know, after further evidence of criminal actions was produced by the right hon. Andy Burnham and after a joint letter calling for a Hillsborough-style inquiry from all six non-Government Westminster party leaders. After the announcement this lunchtime from Downing Street of a full inquiry into the scandal, emergency debates may become an even more popular route to get the Government to listen and act.

In the light of the announcement, I want to acknowledge all the people who have been involved in getting us to this point. I will start by thanking my constituent Glenn Wilkinson for his persistence and dogged determination when he came to see me in 2010 to tell me his story. I have kept him at the centre of whatever I have attempted to do on this issue. I also thank the many individuals and campaign groups who have fought for years to get to this point: the Manor House group, the Contaminated Blood Campaign, and Tainted Blood. I thank the Haemophilia Society, in particular Liz Carroll, its chief executive, and Jefferson Courtney, the policy and public affairs manager. Over 2,400 individuals have tragically lost their lives. They are not here to see this announcement, but their voices live on through their family members, who have never given up fighting for them. The campaign, which has run for many years, has at times had the great benefit of brilliant investigative journalists, including Caroline Wheeler of *The Sunday Times*, who was formerly a correspondent on the *Hull Daily Mail*, and the many researchers and journalists who worked on the BBC “Panorama” documentary on the disaster from just a few months ago. I know that the *Daily Mail* is not a favourite of yours, Mr Speaker, but it also ran a good story on its front page last week.

I thank the 111 parliamentarians who are members of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, particularly my co-chair the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the previous chair Jason McCartney, who is no longer a Member, Margaret Ritchie and Mark Durkan, who are also no longer Members but were vocal in the campaign, and of course the right hon. Andy Burnham, who set out clearly in his valedictory speech why this was unfinished business and why we needed a public inquiry. Finally, I thank the late right hon. Paul Goggins, who was a huge inspiration in this cause.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is completely right to thank all those people, but there is one person missing from that list: herself. The whole House should thank her for her tireless work over the past seven years on this absolutely brilliant campaign. This shows how Parliament should work: a constituent raised the issue with her; she campaigned on it non-stop; she was not fobbed off; she pursued it doggedly; and she has played a huge role in bringing us to this point.

Last night, I had a load of emails from constituents who have been affected by this scandal, and I want to say how grateful they are to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those comments, but this is down to the combined effort of so many people over so many years.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has been dogged in her determination and in not giving up. My constituent David Thomas came to see me in similar circumstances, as many constituents have done with Members on both sides of the House, but if he had not done so I would not even have been aware of the scandal, let alone of the need to deal with it so fully. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the national and regional groups, such as Haemophilia Wales, who have done so much to stand up for those affected in particular locations? Their work has highlighted that this was a legacy issue from the UK Department of Health and that complications relating to the devolved status of health services across the UK need to be addressed in the inquiry.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes that point well.

I want to comment on how we handle disasters and on the best way forward for a Hillsborough-style inquiry established by the Government.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I add my congratulations to the hon. Lady on her brilliant leadership on this issue. While the announcement is incredibly welcome news, does she agree that there is an urgency here, because the people who continue to suffer need help now? There is a danger of the process going on for years and leaving them still waiting for support.

Diana Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The timetabling of any inquiry needs to be set out clearly, and I hope that the Minister may be able to help us with that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that point, and I congratulate her and Andy Burnham, because this issue has been going on for a very long time. Has she had any indication from No. 10 Downing Street about the form of the inquiry? Some of my constituents have similar problems to her constituents, so can she give us any clarification?

Diana Johnson: Just like every other Member, I have only seen what is out in the media, and I understand that there will be a consultation on the form of the inquiry. I am sure that the Minister will be able to help us in his contribution.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I join in the tributes to the hon. Lady and the all-party group, of which I have been a member, because this is an example of how Parliament can work well. There is a family in Letchworth who said to me:

“As a family, we have suffered years of misery because of this scandal.”

Does the hon. Lady agree that it is right to consult the victims and their families on the form of the inquiry?

Diana Johnson: Absolutely. The right hon. and learned Gentleman makes a good point and I will come on to that.

I do not need to remind the House of the damage that public disasters do to all those who are affected, as we know from the Hillsborough tragedy in 1989 and, more recently, the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower. Every public disaster of this kind is different: their causes differ; the victims suffer in different ways; and the measures necessary to support those affected, and their families, also differ. However, every victim has a fundamental right to one thing: answers. They deserve to be told what went wrong, why it went wrong, and who is responsible for what happened. The story of the injustice they have suffered needs to be set out and told to the wider public. Their voices need to be heard. Apologies, compensation and other forms of support are essential, but if their right to answers is not also satisfied, they will be denied true and meaningful justice.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case, and I thank her for all her work. As she said at the beginning, many, many victims have died. Their families are still here and are still grieving, and they need answers as much as the victims.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This tragedy has taken the life of more than 2,400 people with haemophilia, infected mainly through blood factor concentrates. Many others, without bleeding disorders, infected through blood transfusions and other means have also lost their lives. Thousands more have been left devastated. The survivors have been left to live with a combination of HIV, hepatitis C and a range of other viruses.

My constituent Glen Wilkinson is one such individual. He has haemophilia and was infected with hepatitis C when he was just 19 during a routine tooth operation. Glen is one of thousands of people who have fallen victim to the worst treatment disaster in the history of our NHS, and one of the worst peacetime disasters ever to take place in this country. Indeed, each of the 15 or so non-terrorist related public disasters I have looked at—ranging from the Bradford City stadium fire in 1985 to the Clapham Junction crash in 1988, the Marchioness disaster and, of course, Hillsborough—was a tragic event, and I do not wish to detract from the magnitude of those events, but the House should note that all those disasters led to a public inquiry.

Hon. Members and their affected constituents are entitled to ask why the same has not happened with contaminated blood. Had more than 2,400 people died over the course of one day or one year, it would be inconceivable for any Government to refuse calls for a public inquiry, yet the devastation caused by the contaminated blood scandal has been spread not over days or years but over several decades.

We must also bear in mind the profound effect this scandal has had on one community, those with bleeding disorders, many of whom were provided with contaminated blood factor concentrates sourced from profit-making American firms. Virtually everyone who had haemophilia at the time has been infected.

Hon. Members will appreciate that the impact can be devastating when friends and close-knit communities are hit by a collective tragedy. Consider, for example,

[*Diana Johnson*]

the Treloar school for disabled children, a special school with a large number of pupils with haemophilia: 72 of its pupils have died because of this scandal. Many were forced to be silent to the suffering, either for fear of the stigma of having HIV, hepatitis C or other viruses, or because they were not even aware that they had those conditions. Important though that distinction is, it does not excuse the fact that successive Governments of all colours have sidestepped the issue for too long.

Internationally, an investigation saw the imprisonment of the former head of France's blood transfusion service and his deputy, and a former French Health Minister was found guilty of manslaughter. In Japan, three company executives were imprisoned and an official was convicted on negligence charges. In the United States, the private companies involved in this tragedy paid out millions in out-of-court settlements across the world.

But nothing of that kind has happened in the UK. In 1991, in response to the threat of court cases, the Government set up an ex gratia payments scheme. There was no implication of liability, no use of the word "compensation" and waivers renouncing the individual's right to take further legal action had to be signed before they could obtain small sums of money.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): A constituent, who does not wish to be named, wants us to include the remit of the Skipton Fund in this review. She, and many others, feel that the remit was wrongly drawn up, and that she and others have been denied the justice they should have had.

Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady makes an important point.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her work on this issue. I welcome the fact that there will be a public inquiry, eventually and at last. Does she agree that that public inquiry should address why the UK was the last country in the western world to introduce a test for hepatitis C, why vital documents were destroyed by the Department of Health and why the UK took 13 years to be self-sufficient in blood products, when it took Ireland only five years?

Diana Johnson: Those are important questions for any inquiry to address.

On today's announcement, the Westminster leaders' joint letter of 7 July provided a blueprint for how such an inquiry should be conducted. First, as with Hillsborough, there should be a commitment to secure full public disclosure of details related to this tragedy, through a process managed by the affected community. There should be a mechanism to ensure all public bodies involved in the scandal are compelled to give oral and written evidence to the inquiry. There need to be assurances that the inquiry will cover the role of American firms in providing blood factor concentrates to people with haemophilia. There should also be an investigation not just of the run-up to the scandal but of its aftermath. Finally, the inquiry has to address the allegations of criminal conduct. As I said earlier, I hope the Minister

will also be able to help us with a timetable for the inquiry, as those affected have waited so long to get to this point.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's chairpersonship of the all-party parliamentary group. My constituent Cathy Young is grateful to her and to other MPs, because those affected would have given up if not for Members of Parliament pursuing this issue. Cathy Young now has access to her husband's health records, which she describes as a fairy tale. Does the hon. Lady agree that those affected by this scandal, if they have not already done so, should get, and have a look at, their family health records?

Diana Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I certainly agree.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her outstanding leadership on this important issue. My constituent Alex Smith has been affected by contaminated blood. A great deal has been said about the Government response and the potential criminal cover-up, but there is also the immoral way in which the victims have been treated and the payments they receive. Many are living in absolute destitution and poverty as a result of Government penny-pinching, which should form part of the review.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is correct. We need to look carefully at the support that has been provided for this group, and at what should be provided in the future.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I add my thanks, on behalf of my constituent Haydn Lewis and his family. Haydn and his brother have died, and other members of their family have been affected. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should learn from the lessons of the thalidomide inquiry and compensation fund to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes that were made on thalidomide?

Diana Johnson: That is an excellent point, and it needs to be considered.

Hywel Williams (Afon) (PC): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I will give way one last time.

Hywel Williams: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I pay tribute to her on behalf of my constituent Jane Jones, whose family have had to deal with great privation for many years because of the scandal. In a written answer to the Welsh Assembly on 27 March there was confirmation that the payments continue to be made on an ex gratia basis, but with no liability being accepted. The answer was in Welsh, but it confirms that the payment of £10,000 to a partner or widow continues on an ex gratia basis.

Diana Johnson: That goes to the heart of it. There has never been any finding of liability, which has resulted in very low payments being made on a support basis, rather than on a compensatory basis.

I strongly believe, and I think the majority of the APPG believe, that a Hillsborough-style inquiry is the best way forward in this case, putting those affected at the heart of whatever is created and set up. They should be given the opportunity to have an input into the terms of reference. They should be able to look at people being considered as the chairperson or panel members of the inquiry, which has to have the support and confidence of all those affected. That is why the Hillsborough inquiry seemed to work effectively. In the case of Hillsborough, this was known as “Families First”, and I hope that approach might be able to continue in this inquiry as it is set up. All those affected need to be treated with the utmost respect and reverence, and to be fully consulted; any information that becomes available should first go to them.

In the remaining few minutes, I wish to talk about the four questions that I think the inquiry needs to look at. Andy Burnham set out in his speech why an inquiry was necessary, and of course he was one of two former Health Secretaries, the other being Lord Owen, who had raised serious concerns about the scandal. We know that the “Panorama” programme and the *Daily Mail* article followed. Given what Andy Burnham said and all the developments in the past few months, serious questions still need to be addressed by a public inquiry. First, why did the Government not act sooner to protect blood supplies once the risks became known? And why were we so reliant on American commercial products for haemophilia patients?

The UK was not self-sufficient in blood supplies, so profit-making American companies played a considerable role in supplying factor concentrates to haemophilia patients. That blood was sourced from much riskier patients, including prison inmates, who were much more likely to have infections and had a financial incentive to be less than honest about their risks of infection. The dangers of American products were discussed in public not from the 1990s, nor the 1980s, but from 1970. As the *Daily Mail* reported last week, files now suggest that at least as early as 1980 officials had even put an estimate on the number of haemophilia patients being infected from these products with what we now know to be hepatitis C. They put the figure at 50 a year, yet it was not until 1986 that they took any action to address that.

If the whole of the UK had been self-sufficient in blood supplies, fewer haemophilia patients would have been infected. We know that, because Scotland had higher levels of self-sufficiency than England. As the BBC “Panorama” programme outlined, that meant that haemophiliacs in England were twice as likely to be infected with HIV as those in Scotland. Even in the mid-1980s, when the dangers of hepatitis C and HIV became known, it appears we could have acted sooner to remove risky blood products. And when the United States started screening its commercial products from March 1983, we carried on using non-screened American supplies that we had purchased before then; how can that possibly be justified?

My second question for the inquiry is: why were patients kept in the dark and not told of the risks once they became known? There are many aspects to this controversy that I know other hon. Members may wish to touch on, but I want to draw the House’s attention to

developments in 1983, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, when there was still uncertainty over whether AIDS was a blood-borne disease.

In November 1983, the then Health Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), told Parliament that there was

“no conclusive evidence that...AIDS is transmitted by blood products.”—[*Official Report*, 14 November 1983; Vol. 48, c. 327-8W.]

Yet earlier that same year his Department was preparing internal documents that said the opposite: in August 1983, that same Department was telling practising homosexuals and drug users not to give blood because of the risk of transmitting AIDS; in the summer of 1983, the Department was preparing a blood donor leaflet that said AIDS was “almost certainly” transmitted by blood and blood products; in July 1983, the UK Haemophilia Centre Doctors’ Organisation said that young children with haemophilia should receive a less risky form of blood product due to the dangers of AIDS; and between March and May 1983, the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service prepared a leaflet for blood donors, which included “haemophiliacs” and “recipients of blood transfusion” on a list of people who could get AIDS, and asked those same individuals not to give blood. Of course, the Scottish Penrose inquiry itself acknowledged that in adopting its position in November 1983, the then Government relied on

“a highly nuanced use of language.”

My third question is: why were some people tested for viruses without their knowledge and only told of the results many years later? There are many such cases of this happening, but I will make reference to just one: Jonathan Evans first tested positive for HIV in 1984 yet was not told of this until seven months later, in mid-1985. That posed a huge health risk to his wider family, and the history of this scandal is full of cases of spouses infecting each other. Tragically, the virus took his life. His son, Jason, was just four years old when his father died. He is still campaigning for justice for his father, and he has been instrumental in generating recent news coverage in the *Daily Mail* article and elsewhere.

Fourthly, there are allegations of a criminal cover-up, on an industrial scale, from the highest ranks of government downwards. At every stage of this scandal, there are concerns that officials knew more than they were letting on. Almost everyone affected by the scandal has encountered issues with lost medical records. Others have recovered their files, only to find that any mention of the connection with contaminated blood has been removed. Some individuals today are unable to access financial support via the Skipton Fund because of what has happened to their medical records. These cases of lost records also extend to the highest level of government. During the Archer inquiry, Lord Owen requested his departmental papers from the time when he was a Health Minister in the 1970s. He was told they had been destroyed

“under the 10-year rule”,

even though there is no evidence of the existence of such a rule.

Finally, when people were forced to sign waivers in 1991, as I mentioned earlier in my speech, they were asked to commit to bringing no further hepatitis C litigation as well as HIV litigation. These individuals did not yet know they had hepatitis C, as the disease has

[*Diana Johnson*]

a long incubation period. It seems that the inescapable conclusion is that departmental officials knew more than they were willing to disclose.

In conclusion, earlier this week the Prime Minister expressed her intention to work more with other party leaders to act in the best interests of this country. She has shown a laudable commitment to that with respect to other public disasters, including the child abuse inquiry and the Hillsborough disaster. Alongside the many thousands of people who have campaigned for justice for so long, I want to personally thank her for showing that same commitment with respect to the contaminated blood tragedy.

There are still questions to be answered on the detail of an inquiry. In welcoming this announcement, we must also be mindful of those who will never see its results: the more than 2,400 people who have tragically lost their lives. Many never even knew of the true scale of the scandal that was impacting on them. Those infected, and their families, will be waiting anxiously to know that the Prime Minister's announcement will truly give them the justice they have so long been denied. But today the Prime Minister has earned a place in history as someone who has listened to an issue that her predecessors had ignored, and put party politics aside in the name of giving people the answers that are their basic right. For that, she has my gratitude.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the first speaker from the Back Benches, I should say that at this stage I have not imposed any formal time limit, but a substantial number of people wish to contribute. Therefore, I know that the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) will exercise a magnificent self-denying ordinance in the length of his oration.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Do we really have to have it? I know what I am doing and am perfectly capable of handling the matter. If it is about the order of speeches—

David Hanson It is the Minister—

Mr Speaker: No, no. I do not need to be advised by the right hon. Gentleman on the handling of the debate. Let me just say that in so far as this was not clear, it was as a result of a failure of communication between the two Front-Bench teams. These matters should be sorted out between the Government and the Opposition, not with people yapping at each other across the Floor of the House or very close to the Speaker's Chair. The Speaker is happy to give effect to what the two sides of the House want, within reason, but that was not made easy on this occasion, and I am seeking to address the matter by consensus. I know that the right hon. Gentleman means well and his offer of assistance is greatly appreciated, but I do not need to take him up on it on this occasion.

1.59 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker. May I join colleagues in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon

Hull North (Diana Johnson) and the work she has done in leading the all-party group, as well to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has been a joint chairman of that group?

I have been working with the victims in my constituency since 2011—for the past six years—and I consider myself a new boy when it comes to this particular tragedy and scandal. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) has spent many hours working tirelessly on behalf of those of his constituents who are victims. I pay tribute to him; I know he wanted to take part in the debate but could not because of Government business.

I thank the Prime Minister for listening to the victims of this extraordinary tragedy and to colleagues in the House, and announcing the inquiry. I acknowledge the Minister's saying to colleagues that the Government are in listening mode on the inquiry's terms of reference and that they will put the victims at its heart. That is what the victims would expect, and they will be grateful for it.

Many victims—this is certainly true of my constituent Clare Walton—initially did not want an inquiry; they wanted a settlement instead. I pay tribute to Andy Burnham for his work on this issue, as well as to the journalists the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North cited. The new evidence that was uncovered led Clare Walton to change her view, and she is now very much supportive of and looking forward to engaging with the inquiry.

It is important that the inquiry looks into the subsequent treatment of victims and holds the relevant bodies to account. On Clare Walton's behalf, I have been attempting to communicate with the Macfarlane Trust, which was one of the five charities set up to help the victims. I say “help,” but I have to tell the Minister that in my experience the Macfarlane Trust has done anything but help my constituent. It has behaved in an utterly despicable way. It refuses to meet my constituent or me—I have requested meetings for the past six years, but they always come back with a reason why they cannot meet.

The trustees of the Macfarlane Trust have bullied my constituent and “fed her with scraps”—those are her words—while at the same time having a charge over her property for all this time and making a profit on it. The trust refuses to discuss the future of the charge on her property. The scheme administrator will soon be changed to the NHS business advisory service, so she wants to know what will happen when that change takes place. I hope the Government will take some of these issues away and respond more fully at the appropriate time. The Macfarlane Trust says that it cannot give any more information until it has clarity from the Department of Health about transitional arrangements; Clare really wants that clarity. I hope the Minister will intimate, as his predecessor did, that the Macfarlane Trust is not much longer for this world. I have struggled even to speak to the trust on the phone.

Another of my constituents, Adrian Melson, is particularly concerned about the discretionary payments on which many victims rely. I hope that as the Minister begins to look at the evidence before him he will look closely at making sure that, if discretionary payments have become something much more permanent, they are recognised as such and not treated as discretionary. Under the previous Prime Minister, whom I commend

for coming out and wanting to resolve this issue, we promised our constituents that no victim would suffer financially under any compensation structure we put in place.

I shall take Mr Speaker's eloquent words on board and end there, other than to say that this is not a party political issue: successive Governments have failed the victims. I hope we can now come together and have this inquiry, but we must make sure that there is a clear timeline and a deadline.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on her leadership on this issue. On the hon. Gentleman's point about coming together, it is important for this issue to be considered at a UK level, because it predates devolution. It is important that the Minister—I thought he was going to speak second in the debate—works with the devolved Administrations and that any future compensation is provided at a UK level so that there are no second-class citizens in the United Kingdom.

Nadhim Zahawi: I think the victims who looked at the Scottish settlement have taken that point on board—that is certainly the case with Adrian Melson—and I am sure that the Government listened to the hon. Gentleman's view. Let us come together and provide a clear timeline for when the victims can get not only justice but compensation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. Just before more Opposition Members are minded to grumble about the fact that the Minister has not yet spoken, and that he is not necessarily next, I should point out that I was in receipt of representations from Opposition Front Benchers on this matter. Some communication between Members on the Opposition Front Bench and Back Benches would be greatly advantageous to the conduct of our proceedings. Before I call the shadow Minister for public health, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), may I gently implore her to speak for no more than 10 minutes, and preferably for fewer, because there are a lot of Members who wish to contribute? After the hon. Lady, the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), will helpfully set out the Government's position. We will then open up to a wider debate. I will not promise complete satisfaction, because that is without precedent in the House, but I will try to ensure that there are as many happy Members as possible.

2.6 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Thank you for your guidance, Mr Speaker.

First and foremost, thanks must go to my outstanding hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who has so valiantly campaigned on this issue for numerous years now. Without her and the dedicated resolve of her and all those she cited who have been involved in this campaign, we would not be where we are today. Thanks must also go to the former Member for Leigh, Andy Burnham, for the debate he

led at the end of the previous Parliament, for which I had the honour of being present. He helped to add expediency to this issue with his commitment to go to the police with the evidence he has if the Government failed to come forward with an inquiry to seek justice for those who have been neglected.

For too long, the contaminated blood community have been simply failed by their Government and ignored by those who have let the demands of those affected fall on deaf ears, leaving the community without justice. It is very welcome—as we have heard in the news in the past hour and a half or so—that an inquiry may finally be happening, and I look forward to hearing further details from the Minister when he responds. I am grateful that he and you, Mr Speaker, have allowed me to speak first so that he can answer the questions I pose. This is a rather unusual format, and I had no prior knowledge that it was going to be changed. I hope that other Members who speak and pose questions will get a response from the Minister; I do not know whether he will get two bites at the cherry or will have to intervene to answer other Members' questions.

This emergency debate is timely and allows the House to have its voice heard fully, which is right after the decades of neglect the contaminated blood community has faced. At any point prior to 12.30 pm, when the announcement was made in the news, the Minister could have come forward and made a statement. That would have saved my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North from having to apply for an emergency debate yesterday. It feels like the order of things has been a little forced, and it is sad that it has had to be forced in this way. But we are where we are.

Labour Members are resolutely in favour of a Hillsborough-style public inquiry, as we made clear in our manifesto a couple of months ago—my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and I pushed for that to be included. The Labour party believes that that style of inquiry would get to the heart of the problems that unfolded in the 1980s and hold to account those who were to blame for this scandal, before it is too late. It is not just our party, but all the parties—especially those on the Opposition Benches—that have made a commitment to stand up for those people seeking justice. That was so clearly documented in the joint letter, which was published on Sunday, from the leaders of every single opposition party here in this House, including, I am pleased to say, of the Democratic Unionist party.

Last November, in a debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, we discussed a whole host of issues that this community faces, including how people could be compensated for the terrible events that have occurred. Today, we are here to debate the fight for justice, which should have happened a lot sooner.

In my contribution, I want to impress on the Minister two key points: first, that the previous two inquiries have, categorically, not been sufficient in seeking justice, which is why a Hillsborough-style inquiry must be actioned; and, secondly, that the evidence presented so far is clear that if we are to have truth and reconciliation after the murky covering up of this scandal, then the strongest of daylight must be shone on every aspect, leaving no stone unturned.

[*Mrs Sharon Hodgson*]

The two previous inquiries—the Archer inquiry in 2009 and the Penrose inquiry in Scotland in 2015—did not go far enough in the eyes of the affected community in getting the truth and justice that they deserve. The Archer inquiry, which was not Government-backed, failed because there were no Department of Health witnesses giving evidence to the convened panel. The Penrose inquiry also did not go far enough in seeking the truth, as it was unable to compel witnesses from outside Scotland when, at the time of the scandal, most, if not all, of the decisions were made in Whitehall. That failure to compel witnesses to attend from outside Scotland meant that the inquiry failed to provide the justice and answers that people from right across the UK deserved.

There are many allegations around this scandal, ranging from Department of Health officials destroying evidence as part of the cover-up, to victims' medical details being tampered with to hide the cause of their infections.

Ian Austin: Two of my constituents have two particular matters that they want the inquiry to consider: first, one said that he was infected with hepatitis C and exposed to the HIV virus, but was not informed of that by the NHS until years afterwards and he wants to be assured that the inquiry will reveal why the truth was hidden; the second wants to know about doctors and scientists being paid by the drug companies and about the precise nature of those deals. He thinks that those deals have to be really properly and rigorously exposed by this inquiry, so that we can get to the bottom of whatever vested interests existed during this scandal.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The evidence on those things has been well documented, especially by the former Member for Leigh and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North. Those who have lived with these conditions, who are brave enough to come forward—and who are at the sharp end of this heinous negligence and the recent uncovering reported in the *Daily Mail* last week—have proved just how important it is that a Hillsborough-style inquiry is set up.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the report, “Self Sufficiency in Blood Products in England and Wales” is unauthorised, and could be perpetuating inaccuracies and outright lies, as my constituent says in a letter to me?

Mrs Hodgson: All of this evidence will have to be examined. In recent days, constituents affected by this scandal have been in contact with my office with intricate details that must be addressed. It is important that those questions, no matter how small they may be, are answered, as they reflect the issues that have inextricably affected that person's whole life. It is most important that those issues are addressed, so that those who have lived with the ramifications of this serious negligence can finally have the justice that they deserve.

Getting to the bottom of the allegations and the evidence and having a full and frank inquiry that brings justice for the many people affected are the reasons why we must have this inquiry. As the joint letter by the

Opposition leaders said, if a panel were to be convened, it must disclose any and all documents related to the scandal, which involves the victims at every stage; and it must compel all parties involved to participate in the disclosure process and not to hinder justice any further. It must also investigate the events leading up to an individual's infection and the aftermath, including allegations of medical details being tampered with, whether people were unknowingly tested for viruses without their knowledge and whether enough was done to identify those at risk of infection. As part of this inquiry, there must also be an investigation into the role of profit-making American firms, which supplied the blood factor concentrates to people with haemophilia.

Although none of this will bring back loved ones and those who have died as a consequence of this scandal, or change the life circumstances of those who are alive today living with these conditions inflicted on them, there is still something that we can do, which is to hold an inquiry. It is the very least that we can do. The thousands of people affected by this scandal must be supported and we must stand beside them in seeking justice, as that is our duty as elected representatives of the public.

I want to conclude with this final remark: none of us here has a magic wand—I know that our constituents think that we do—and we cannot turn back time and stop this scandal happening. Sadly, that power does not exist, but the power that does exist, at the behest of the Minister before us today, is that of facilitating the justice for those who live with the aftermath of this scandal. Here, today, we can send a message—a loud and strong message to those who campaign on this issue day in, day out—that Parliament has listened and is on their side. We in this House have heard them; we in this House are there with them; and we in this House will do all that we can for them in their quest for justice. We cannot let them down. We can help facilitate the truth once and for all. Parliament is listening to the individuals who have spent decades fighting against the system to get the truth that they seek, and the Government must listen to Parliament. Parliament is saying: fix this, provide those thousands of people who never asked for this to happen to them with the justice that they so rightly deserve. We cannot fail them any longer.

2.16 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for explaining to the House the sequence in which we are speaking today in this very important debate.

I wish to start by offering my personal apology to all those who have been affected by the tragedy of infected NHS-supplied blood or blood products. This has had a terrible impact on so many individuals and families. I know that, quite rightly, there have been many debates on the subject in this Chamber, which have been prompted by the quite proper concern of Members on both sides of this House over many years.

There have been two previous inquiries on this issue: the privately funded Archer report, which was published in 2009, and the Scottish Government-funded Penrose inquiry report, which was published in 2015. However, I am aware that, over the years, there have been several calls for a full independent inquiry.

In addition to those reports, the Department of Health has worked to bring greater transparency to the events. Many documents relating to blood safety, covering the period from 1970 to 1995, have been published and are available on The National Archives website. Those documents provide a comprehensive picture of events and decisions, many of which were included in the documents reviewed by the Penrose inquiry. However, I recognise that, for those affected, these steps do not go far enough to provide the answers that they want or to get to the truth of what happened.

In the light of those concerns and of reports of new evidence and of allegations of potential criminality, we think that it is important to understand the extent of what is claimed and the wider issues that arise. I am pleased to be able to confirm to the House that the Government intend to call an inquiry into the events that led to so many people being infected with HIV and/or hepatitis C through NHS-supplied blood or blood products.

Norman Lamb: I am very pleased with the news that the Minister has just confirmed. Will he ensure that the process that is followed—I very much support a Hillsborough-style inquiry—facilitates the ability to bring criminal charges so that the full force of the law can be applied to anyone who may be guilty of criminal wrongdoing?

Mr Dunne: I shall come on directly to the form that the independent inquiry should take, and I hope that that will help to address the right hon. Gentleman's question.

We have heard calls for an inquiry based on the model that was used to investigate the Hillsborough tragedy—the so-called Hillsborough-style panel—which would allow for a sensitive investigation of the issues, allowing those affected and their families close personal engagement with an independent and trusted panel. There have also been suggestions that only a formal statutory inquiry led by a senior judge under the Inquiries Act 2005 will provide the answers that those affected want. Such an inquiry would have the power to compel witnesses and written evidence—an apparent shortcoming in previous reports. The Government can see that there are merits in both approaches, and to ensure that whatever is established is in the interests of those affected we will engage with the affected groups and interested parties, including the all-party parliamentary group, before taking a final decision on the type of inquiry.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the terms of the inquiry allow for recommendations to be made about the correct levels of compensation for those who have been affected?

Mr Dunne: I shall make a little progress, then endeavour to answer that.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and Ministers at the Department of Health will meet those affected and their families so that we can discuss the issues and understand their preferences directly about the style, scope and duration of the inquiry.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful for what the Minister is saying, but can he give a time estimate of when the meetings will take place? My experience of the Department

of Health is that, on this issue, deadlines are not met and things have to be dragged on to the Floor of the House to get Ministers to respond. Is there a set timetable for when a decision will be made and those meetings held?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady, who has taken an active lead in encouraging inquiries, will want to make sure that we get it right. We will take the time that is necessary to consult colleagues and interested groups. Our intention is to be able to come back to the House as soon as practicable—I anticipate in the autumn.

David Hanson: The Minister has mentioned the Department of Health, and he will know that my constituents live under a devolved Administration in Wales but were infected in a hospital in Liverpool. What consultation is he undertaking with the Welsh Assembly, including on the schemes that it is running, and on the liability ultimately for any objective?

Mr Dunne: We recognise that there is a legitimate interest for all constituent nations in the United Kingdom. As many of these incidents took place before devolution, we intend to consult devolved Governments.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, quite rightly, the inquiry has to give answers to the victims of the scandal and their families? There will be great interest in the conclusions of the inquiry in the House and among the wider public to ensure that historical circumstances that led to the scandal are never repeated.

Mr Dunne: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Dunne: I shall make a little progress on devolved matters before responding to other colleagues. Regardless of the style of the inquiry, our intention is that it should cover the whole of the UK, so we will be in direct contact with counterparts in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland to discuss that with them and to seek their views before determining those aspects of the inquiry.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): First, I apologise to the House, the Minister and to you, Mr Speaker, for not being present at the beginning of this very, very important debate. The Minister said that he is going to consult on the inquiry, which will be UK-wide. He will know that we do not have an Assembly, and there is no corresponding Health Minister in Northern Ireland, which is absolutely disgraceful. There is no prospect of our having such a Minister before the autumn, so with whom will the Minister liaise in Northern Ireland in the Assembly's absence?

Mr Dunne: We will ask the Northern Ireland Office to facilitate discussions with officials and representatives in Northern Ireland.

Albert Owen: On the point about devolution made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), is the Minister telling the House that this is a UK-wide inquiry and that the consultation will take

[*Albert Owen*]

place across the UK, so that there will be equality for people such as Mr and Mrs Hutchinson in my constituency in the outcome of the inquiry?

Mr Dunne: The scope of the inquiry will be determined as part of the discussions which, as I have said, will take place over coming weeks and short number of months. Our intention is that the devolved Administrations and their residents will have full access to participation in the inquiry, irrespective of where people live or were infected.

The Government intend to update the House once the discussions are complete, and I encourage colleagues with a specific interest to engage in discussions through the all-party group or other relevant groups. In the meantime, if anyone in the House or outside has any evidence of criminality, they should take that evidence to the police as soon as possible. If anyone has any other evidence that they want the inquiry to consider, I would request that they submit it to the inquiry once it has been established. The Government will write to everyone in receipt of payments from the current schemes to make sure that they all know about today's announcement and to inform them of next steps.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister's comments. Will he confirm that when the scope of the inquiry is drawn up care will be taken not to do anything that might endanger future trials? Will he further emphasise that anyone with information should make sure that it is made available to the police?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend will recollect that the recent Hillsborough inquiry gave rise to certain information that was made available to the police and led to charges being made. We would envisage that the inquiry that is established would have the ability to do the same thing if appropriate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Dunne: I must make progress, because Mr Speaker has encouraged me to take 10 minutes so that everyone can make a contribution, and I have already exceeded that.

I should like to take the opportunity to inform the House that implementing the reforms to the infected blood ex-gratia support scheme remains a priority for the Government. That is why, as David Cameron established a year or so ago, within this spending review period, until 2020-21, up to £125 million of additional funding has been added to the budget for the ex-gratia support scheme. That more than doubles the annual spend over the spending review period. The second consultation on scheme reform, which closed on 17 April this year, received over 250 responses. The consultation contained proposals for a special category mechanism that would allow people with stage 1 hepatitis C to apply for the higher annual payment, greatly increasing the number of individuals eligible for the higher payment. The responses are being looked at and the consultation response will be published in due course. All the annual payments will remain linked to the consumer prices index and will be disregarded for tax and benefit purposes.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for what he said about input into the inquiry. As the new chair of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS, I am sure that our members will want to contribute. I want to press him on the financial liabilities arising from the inquiry and the impact of devolution. Will he guarantee that, no matter where anyone was infected or where they live now, they will be treated with equality across the United Kingdom when it comes to financial liabilities and payments arising from the inquiry?

Mr Dunne: I have just described the additional contribution to the financial scheme for England. It will be for the inquiry to decide whether it wants to make recommendations about financial arrangements. At present, I am not in a position to give the hon. Gentleman the confirmation that he is seeking. That will have to come through the inquiry.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My constituent Lesley Hughes was infected with hepatitis C in 1970, but this was discovered only about three years ago. Will any consideration be given to those long years of suffering when the compensation scheme is put into effect?

Mr Dunne: I offer my sympathy to my right hon. Friend's constituent for the challenges she finds herself facing. We have to say at this point that it will be down to individuals to make their applications. We will respond to the consultation in due course. I strongly encourage my right hon. Friend to make representations on his constituent's behalf to the inquiry when it is established.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for being extremely generous in giving way. May I press him on the issue of health records? Many families are still trying to establish what has actually happened, while the Minister is discussing the scope of the inquiry. Should we write to the Minister if there are any issues with families obtaining health records?

Mr Dunne: I think it would be appropriate to write to the inquiry, once it is established. I completely concur with an earlier point about ensuring that any evidence of medical records being tampered with should be made available to the inquiry.

I am afraid that I must bring my remarks to a conclusion. I thank those on both sides of the House who have worked tirelessly on the issue over the years. I add my voice to those of others who have already spoken to commend the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). She has spoken very powerfully in the House on this subject not only today, but on many occasions and for many years. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North did, I thank past and present members of that group, notably the former chair, Jason McCartney, late of this parish. Finally, I thank ministerial colleagues who have handled this delicate issue in previous Administrations, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who has worked so hard not just for his constituents, but for all those affected by the tragedy.

Mr Speaker: I appeal to the Scottish National party spokesperson certainly not to exceed 10 minutes, and preferably less. The Minister took a little longer, but he did take several interventions and was setting out the Government's position, but there is no requirement or need for the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) to take quite as long.

2.32 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) said, 2,400 people have died following the worst disaster in NHS history. That was due to a shortage of blood and clotting factors, which led to the NHS sourcing products from America. The problem is that the factor IX concentrates for men with haemophilia or women with Von Willebrand disease are made from thousands of samples. The moment one or two people within that collection are affected is the start of the virus, and that was why these patients were affected at a much higher rate than those who had a single blood transfusion. The problem is that the issue goes back decades and it has not been properly dealt with, as has been said already.

There have been multiple debates, statements and urgent questions on the issue during the two years in which I have been in the House—I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North for keeping at it with the all-party parliamentary group—but most of them have been about support. It was only last July that the Government finally came forward with a strengthened support package for these people. It is important to recognise that the payments are not compensation; they are ex gratia support payments, and they do not recognise the loss and suffering of the victims of contaminated blood. This seemed to come about only after the Scottish Government came up with a much more generous package in the form of a much larger lump sum, ongoing payments and, in particular, a 75% pension to the spouse and bereaved families. Such people still do not get sufficient support here in England, but it is not right that someone who has lost a partner to this scandal is not compensated.

We heard in March this year—a mere seven months after the announcement of a support package—that the Government were consulting on perhaps restricting who would qualify for the highest payments, and that the payments would not be index-linked. The youngest remaining victim is approximately 35. They have a whole lifetime to go through. That might be a shortened lifetime in comparison with ours, but we cannot suddenly leave people in poverty further down the line. These things need to be dealt with. I welcome the Minister's commitment that the payments will be linked to the consumer prices index. We may need a debate on support, but that is not what this debate is about.

Hywel Williams: I am reluctant to interrupt the hon. Lady's remarks, but may I point out that the support also extends to Wales, not just to England? As far as I understand it, there is also a £10,000 payment for spouses in Wales. Is it the hon. Lady's understanding that the inquiry's terms of reference will include the actions of the Governments in Wales, Scotland and possibly Northern Ireland, as well as what has happened in England? I had intended to ask the Minister that question, but could not make an intervention.

Dr Whitford: The Scottish Government set up the Penrose inquiry, but I would assume that any inquiry will look at the whole UK, and the Minister has committed to that. It must be remembered that the decisions that led to the scandal were taken here and in Whitehall. This was before devolution. Governments such as the Scottish Government have tried to step up to support citizens who have been affected, but getting the answers to what caused the situation is a matter for this place.

Catherine West: Does the hon. Lady agree that the lack of trust has been enhanced by documents such as "Self-Sufficiency in Blood Products in England and Wales"? That was a Department of Health document, but many people felt it was inaccurate and contained outright lies?

Dr Whitford: The inquiry will have to look at all those things. Documents, patients' records, things that were altered and hidden, and things that are hiding behind public interest barriers now all need to be opened up so that light can be shed on the matter, as with Hillsborough.

Penrose was a Scotland-only inquiry. The Department of Health was invited to take part and turn it into a UK-wide inquiry, but it declined. One of the key weaknesses of the inquiry was that Penrose did not have the right to summon documents or people.

I remember when the scandal started to unfold in the '80s. As a surgeon who was, of course, using blood on her patients, I remember how shocked I was at the mere thought that an action I might have taken could have harmed a patient I was looking after. In my elective surgery, I set about chasing every single blood cell to avoid spilling blood. I used electrocautery and all sorts of modern techniques. If I were to wheel out the staff from my theatre now, they would moan about how long I used to spend doing that. If a clinician is dealing with someone who has been hit by a bus, however, they have no choice.

I remember a critic of Penrose in 2015 saying that they were surprised that clinicians showed so much trust in the quality of blood, but a clinician who is using hundreds of drugs, implants, machines and blood products must be able to trust them. We have no mechanism personally to check them. That is the role of the Government and all their agencies. It is why we have licensing and inspections, and it is why action must be taken when there is a suspicion of harm. Failing to act, hiding and not dealing with the situation at the time all happened pre-devolution, and this inquiry must take account of that.

At a conference in Glasgow in 1980, clinicians were already raising concerns about changes in the liver function of patients who were receiving blood concentrate for haemophilia. A 1981 meeting of the UK's Blood Transfusion Research Committee, which we have all read about recently, recognised that about 50 patients a year developed some form of liver damage. Yet the decision at that meeting appeared to be to let that continue and simply to study the situation, using those patients as a way of developing a test for what was known at the time as non-A, non-B hepatitis. It is important that we ensure that this inquiry looks at all this. The official from the Department of Health and

[*Dr Whitford*]

Social Security who was at that meeting would not attend Penrose. Such people need to be called by this inquiry.

Going forward, the inquiry must include the families and the victims so that we are sensitive to what they want to know. This is also about not just the Government but producers—and not just producers in America. We try to make ourselves feel better by blaming this on the States, where people bought blood, and where people with addictions, people living in poverty and prisoners were used. In the mid-70s, prisoners in this country were also used, and it is claimed that that was encouraged by the Home Office as part of prisoner rehabilitation. We need the documents on that; we need to understand if that decision was made. UK producers have often been found wanting in the quality of product they came up with, so we must not pat ourselves on the back and imagine that the UK product was somehow safe and that this was all due to the US. We need to follow this right down and get the answers.

These people have been failed so many times, over and over, and it is crucial that that does not happen again. We need to keep the Government on their toes. We need to have reports back from this inquiry as it is set up, so that we know what it is actually going to look into. If we fail to get answers this time, and particularly if we fail to deliver compensation for the lives lost, the suffering, the failure to get a mortgage or insurance, and the costs of care, we will have failed these people all over again.

2.41 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on securing this important debate. I was in the Chamber when the former Member for Leigh raised these very concerning issues, which need to be looked at in the inquiry. That struck a chord with me, so I am delighted to be back in the Chamber to see this debate.

Like many Members on both sides of the House, I have been contacted by constituents who have told me about their experiences and about how contaminated blood has affected them, their family life and their friends. Every so often as a constituency MP, we meet the saddest constituents who tell us the most heartbreakening stories. We sit there week in, week out, and those stories resonate with us, but they are not stories for the victims—they are daily life. These are wrecked lives, but the people have done nothing wrong of their own accord—it is pure injustice.

It is clear that the contaminated blood products that were used decades ago have continued daily to affect people's lives in a devastating and destructive way. When I have heard the stories of how people have been affected, they have lived with me, and I can understand the campaigning that has been done by Members on both sides of the House. I am therefore delighted to talk about my constituents' experiences.

Today, we finally recognise what has happened, and the Government are ready to tackle this injustice. I am delighted that that is being done in the name of the victims and their families, who did nothing to bring this on themselves.

After I became the MP for Eastleigh in May 2015, I met one of my constituents from Bishopstoke, Gary Webster, who has been left coping with HIV, hepatitis C and possibly variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease as a result of the NHS blood products that were used during a routine procedure in the 1980s to treat his haemophilia.

Dr Whitford: It will be important that the inquiry goes far enough back. The decision to heat-treat albumin for hepatitis B was made in the mid-60s, but we did not treat concentrates. We need to make sure that all these conditions are included.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for that input. It is absolutely right that she, like all our constituents, brings her experience to this. We need to make sure that we do go back far enough.

Last year, Gary attended a debate we had here once again to discuss this heartbreaking issue. He attended a specialist school in Alton, where he was one of many haemophiliacs. He told me that he kept in contact with around 100 other students, all of whom had been affected by contaminated blood, although only around 20 were still alive. These students all contracted illnesses through blood products they had received because of their haemophilia. Tragically, Gary's story is similar to that of thousands of others across the country.

Other constituents, some of whom wish not to be named, have had grave financial burdens placed on them and their families as a result of the diseases they contracted from contaminated blood, which have affected their lives. It is only right that we support those whose lives have been significantly affected by these contaminated products. I am therefore pleased to hear about the additional support that the Government will provide to those who have been roundly affected. I am particularly pleased that the annual payments for those with hepatitis stage 2 will increase to £15,500, and then to £18,500 in 2018-19. Payments to those co-infected with HIV and hepatitis stage 2 will also go up, to £36,500 by 2018-19. I am pleased to see that these payments will be linked to CPI.

That will help to support all our constituents we know have been affected. I know from speaking to Gary and others about the real hardship and challenges these conditions have brought to their lives, and about the difficulty they face in working, and in bringing up and supporting their families in the way they would have liked had they not been affected.

Almost £400 million has been paid out to those affected by five different organisations, which have been funded by the Department of Health. I am delighted to hear about the £125 million the Government have committed as additional funding for the reformed scheme, which will double the Department's annual spend on the scheme over the next five years. That money must go to the people who really need it—that should absolutely be noted—because the daily-life decisions they have made have been really difficult because of their financial impact.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The hon. Lady talks about a reformed scheme, and some people have fallen outside the existing scheme. My constituent Sharon Moore, who suffered a transfusion of contaminated blood, has been told that she is outside the criteria.

Would the hon. Lady urge the Government to look at cases again under the new scheme to make sure that people are not missed and not excluded unnecessarily?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that point forward. There is nothing more frustrating for an MP than hearing that people have just fallen outside the bracket. That is the worst place to be, and the scope of the inquiry will perhaps give us the chance to look at that.

This Government have done significantly more than other Governments to protect those who have been affected. There is a commitment to ensure that we pull the five fairly complex schemes together and transfer them into a new scheme in 2017. These people have complicated and difficult lives anyway, and it is only right that we make it easier for victims to get the support they need.

I am so pleased that the Prime Minister made her announcement this morning and that there will be a full and wide-ranging inquiry into the tragedy. I am pleased that the inquiry will be drawn together by the victims, to support and suit the victims. I am pleased that they will finally have a voice—the strongest voice possible—so that they can get the most and the fullest answers they can, which is what they deserve. It is only right that this consultation will be held with those affected by this terrible injustice, so that their families also have a voice.

I hope that the inquiry will provide answers for those who are looking for them. In particular, there are concerns about criminality—when I heard that issue raised in this House, it was extremely concerning. We now have a vehicle to get people's voices heard, and if there is anything that should be going through the courts, we can do something about that.

With this inquiry, we have an opportunity to make sure that no voice is lost, and that the victims and their families get the right inquiry, the fullest compensation and the answers they rightly deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just advise the House that with the exception of the maiden speaker whom I am about to call, colleagues should be thinking in terms of speeches of five minutes each, or at most six, if the Chair is to accommodate everybody? I am sure there are colleagues who would like to expatiate eloquently and at length, and on other occasions they might be free to do so, but that will have to wait, I say to the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for the long winter evenings that lie ahead. Before that, I hope that we can give a warm, enthusiastic and encouraging welcome to our maiden speaker, Anneliese Dodds.

2.50 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate.

As the new MP for Oxford East, I must say that it is a shame to me that it was the Oxford haemophilia centre that produced blood products which resulted in many people contracting blood-borne diseases, and further, that guidance from the centre in the early 1980s advocated

the use of humans to test infectivity. I will repeat that—the use of humans to test infectivity. However, I am very proud of the people from Oxford who have campaigned for so many years for justice, along with many others mentioned by my hon. Friends. Their fight, as we have heard, has been simply for truth and for accountability so that events like these can never happen again. As I start my maiden speech, I would like to dedicate my words to them and to all the other people in Oxford who fought for justice against all the odds—not least, also, the survivors of the Bullfinch sexual abuse scandal, whose bravery has been remarkable and an inspiration.

I am enormously grateful to the people of Oxford East for electing me as their representative. As such, I of course take over from Andrew Smith, who served us for three decades as our MP and who many people in all parts of this House knew very well. Like many people, Andrew came initially to Oxford unsure of whether it would become his home, but quickly recognised the potential of our great city, not least because as a student he met, very quickly, his wonderful wife Val, who was also known by many people in this House. Val was an incredibly powerful advocate for the community of Blackbird Leys, which she served as a county and city councillor for many years. Her wisdom and her kindness is still very sadly missed by many of us.

Andrew is undoubtedly best known in Oxford East as a diligent constituency MP who cares passionately about our city and all its people, including of course those living in his home community of Blackbird Leys. But Andrew also had a very distinguished career in Parliament, including serving in the Cabinet as Chief Secretary to the Treasury from 1999 to 2002, and then as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions from 2002 to 2004. Andrew's work, with others, lifted more than a million pensioners and half a million children out of poverty, helped restore the national finances—a piece of history often ignored or, sadly, distorted in this House—and brought in some of the biggest increases in health and overseas aid spending our country has ever seen. Andrew also presided over groundbreaking disability rights legislation, set up the pension protection fund, and helped bring in the pension credit, among many, many more transformative initiatives.

Andrew is none the less an incredibly humble man. He always stressed how his achievements came about through working with others, either in this House or in Oxford. In fact, Andrew is so humble that when he was in the Cabinet running Britain's welfare state, his own television was so dilapidated that it had to be whacked many times before it would actually work. He is very intelligent but also very straightforward, without any airs or graces, and is immensely respected for it. I am sure that Members in all parts of this House will wish him very well for a long and very happy retirement.

Oxford East could be imagined as a constituency filled only with gleaming spires, detectives driving Aston Martins, and mysterious university dons. But while Oxford East boasts two excellent universities and bustles with students during term time, Oxford also has an impressive industrial heritage, and enormous further industrial potential, with the right infrastructure investment and support. What was the Pressed Steel Company plant, now BMW Cowley, produces nearly a quarter of a million Mini cars every year. Its engineers, technicians

[*Anneliese Dodds*]

and apprentices are among the best in the world. Oxford as a city voted to remain in the EU, although some areas in the city had a majority to leave. Whether people voted to leave or to remain, no one voted to deny our city its potential. It is essential that European markets remain open to businesses like BMW Cowley, and that we retain Oxford's many and various links with European and global science, as well as protecting the EU citizens who have made their home in our city.

In fact, Oxford is a city that has always looked outwards, as the first ever Oxfam shop on Broad Street reminds us. People with roots from all over the world call Oxford East their home. I am very proud that in my constituency we have five mosques, many different Christian churches, and substantial Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish populations. But I feel that the potential of many people from all of our communities in Oxford East is currently being held back.

Yesterday I attended the funeral of Bill Buckingham, who had been a Labour councillor and campaigner in Oxford East for 70 years; he died at the age of 96. Bill was among many who came back after serving our country in the second world war, determined that Lloyd George's promise after the first world war now had to be turned into a socially inclusive reality, with homes built for heroes as part of mixed communities to be proud of. As Bevan put it at the time, we needed high-quality housing where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer could all be neighbours, without social distinction.

What of that ambitious vision survives now? House prices and rents in Oxford are the least affordable in Britain outside London. Renters of homes have fewer rights than if they were renting a sofa or a fridge. The rules for housing benefit have been changed so people whose families have lived in Oxford for generations are being forced out of their city for the crime of merely earning an average, not above-average, wage; and, to pay for the right to buy in housing association properties, up to a third of Oxford's remaining council stock could vanish.

For me, people doing their best to bring up their children on low incomes in Oxford are today's heroes and heroines. Often running between more than one job to make ends meet, I must say that it comes as a slap in the face to them when they hear politicians refusing to admit that there is such a thing as in-work poverty. I was disturbed to hear that repeatedly in this House last week. Britain, and especially Oxford, urgently needs more genuinely affordable homes, with affordability not covering homes worth £400,000, as is currently the case. Renters need stronger rights, and they need, above all, a system that recognises houses as homes—as places to live and not merely investment opportunities. We also, of course, need to unlock the potential of our communities and not allow them to be asset-stripped.

I live on the Rose Hill estate in Oxford with my family—I am very pleased that some of them are here today. It is a wonderful, friendly place, albeit one where almost half the children on the estate grow up in poverty. Bill Buckingham, along with many other local people, kept Rose Hill's community centre going through thick and thin, even when it burned down, and now we have a new centre on my estate, but other community

facilities have been run down in recent years. I loved meeting other parents during baby sessions at the children's centre when I had my first child four years ago. As you can see, he is quite grown-up now, albeit a little bit tired. But by the time my daughter arrived 18 months ago, there were no more baby sessions available. Instead, the children's centre is only available for supervised contact sessions and for two—that is two—hours a week of supervised play. Community spaces such as children's centres may not grab the headlines, but for many people they mean the difference between loneliness and friendship, between ill-health and wellbeing, and between division and neighbourliness.

Oxford East and its incredible people have so much potential, but too often, I feel, they are being held back. As their MP, I am ambitious for our city and its people, and I will devote the time they have given me in this place to ensure a better, brighter and fairer future for them, and for people like them, across this country.

2.58 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I, too, start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her leadership and persistence on this issue, on which she and my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) have done tireless work. I welcome the Minister's statement that a public inquiry will happen on this most important of issues. The Prime Minister has clearly listened to views across the House on the matter.

At one of my first surgery appointments, Richard and his wife came to see me to tell me his story. Richard was a haemophiliac who was sent to a school for the physically disabled in Hampshire when he was 11. For six years, he was given hundreds of thousands of units of factor VIII. Prior to that he had been given cryoprecipitate, which was perfectly workable in moderating his condition. The factor VIII prophylactic treatment was meant to prevent the dangers caused by haemophilia. It changed Richard's life. Sadly, 64 of the 75 people from Richard's school are no longer with us. Many of those young people died in their early teens.

This case is a double tragedy. Richard and his wife told me the very good news that, in later life, they decided to have children, but due to the risk of his hepatitis affecting the unborn baby, they had to have a termination, so they are childless as well as having been affected by terrible diseases throughout their lives.

I neglected to congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on her very fine maiden speech. She certainly made a far better job of it than I did of mine when I stood here two years ago. Her tremendous words were highly relevant to the topic under discussion. I am sure she will make many further fine contributions in the years ahead.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the inquiry needs to consider the challenges faced by people affected by contaminated blood who want children? A constituent of mine had one round of IVF treatment covered by the NHS, but he was not entitled to a second round, so he had to pay for it himself. We should consider such issues and their effect on people in the round.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These terrible diseases have so many tragic implications. Through no fault of their own, people did not know that the treatments would have an adverse impact on their health.

Helen was infected in the 1980s, but it was only when she moved to my constituency in 2006 and registered with a new GP that she was diagnosed with hepatitis and its associated difficulties. She has had many consequent health problems, including four strokes, diabetes and rheumatoid osteoporosis. It has had a huge impact on her life. She calls her health a “ticking time bomb”. She had to relocate back from France after trying to set up a new life there with her husband and two children.

I have spoken to both of those constituents today. It is incredible how lightly they seem to carry their burdens. They have moved on from the principal issue, which was compensation, and what they want now is a public inquiry to get to the bottom of this. It is about getting answers. I am not saying that compensation is not important—it is hugely important, particularly for their spouses and children—but today they want answers.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good case. Does he agree that, while we welcome the Government’s inquiry and the funding given so far, transparency should be at its core? That is what it is all about.

Kevin Hollinrake: I absolutely agree. The Minister may confirm at the end of the debate, if he gets the chance, that the Government have released all the relevant documents in their possession. It is absolutely right that there should be full transparency and that key witnesses who were involved in this tragedy should be interviewed.

One of the biggest outstanding questions is: what was known? Helen told me that, despite the fact that she did not find out until 20 years after she was infected, the hospital had known for years. That is a tragic set of circumstances.

Richard sent me a passage that he found during his research. As early as 1975, Dr Joseph Garrett Allen, then professor of surgery at Stanford University in California, wrote to Dr William Maycock, then head of the transfusion service in the UK, to warn him of the severe dangers of using US-pooled plasma sourced from paid skid-row donors and prisoners. He said that the situation was extraordinarily hazardous.

My constituents want answers to the following questions. What was known about the risks? Was Parliament informed about the change from self-sufficiency to imported products? What was found out and why were the products not withdrawn? Was it a cover-up or negligence? Did clinicians take a paternalist approach or was it simply incompetence?

I welcome the fact that this Government have done more than any other on compensation and transparency. I welcome the public inquiry and hope I can play my part in making sure that my constituents, their loved ones and everyone else affected by this terrible tragedy get answers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. May I remind hon. Members that Mr Speaker asked that speeches be kept to about five minutes?

3.6 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her sterling work, and to Andy Burnham and so many others who have pursued the issue relentlessly over the years. It is a testament to their commitment that they have kept going, even when all hope seemed to be lost.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for her excellent maiden speech. I am sure that we share a lot of common ground, and I hope we will work together over the coming months and years.

Before Parliament broke up back in April, Andy Burnham laid a challenge to all the parties to include in their manifestos a commitment to the victims of contaminated blood. I am very pleased and proud that my party saw fit to do so. Our manifesto stated:

“Victims of contaminated blood products deserve answers.”

In 2008, the SNP Scottish Government established the Penrose public inquiry, which reported in 2015. In government we have also worked with stakeholder groups to develop a substantially improved compensation scheme, which is now the best in the UK. SNP MPs will support a full public inquiry for the rest of the UK, and I am very proud to stand by those words today.

I am incredibly pleased and surprised to hear that the Government have changed their stance. When we last met in April it did not feel as though much more was going to happen, so the change in the Government’s attitude is very welcome. I do not want to appear churlish, but the changed numbers in this Parliament mean that some things that seemed impossible before are now open for debate. I am very glad about that.

There has been recognition of the limitations of Penrose and what the Scottish Government could do. We could not compel witnesses to attend and we had a limited remit to consider negligence, so it is good that we now have this opportunity to relook at all the issues. I am also glad to hear the Government commit to working with the devolved Administrations, because we have the experience of an inquiry, limited though it was. I hope to hear more about the ways in which the Scottish Government and victims in Scotland will be brought in as part of the process.

In the April 2016 debate, I mentioned my constituent Maria. I have not been able to reach her to ask for her views, because this debate and the Government’s announcement came so very late in the day, but I want to put on the record again that Maria contracted hep C in 1981 from a blood transfusion following a miscarriage. She did not find out for many years. Even when she sought a diagnosis, it took two years to get it. She would want this House to know that, having lived with hep C for 36 years, she does not want charity. She does not want vouchers or handouts; she wants to be treated fairly and with dignity. That is the very least she deserves from this process.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Oxford haemophilia centre serves my constituents. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate. Does the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) agree that victims want not just transparency but justice, and that if we find evidence of a cover-up, the individuals involved should face the full force of the law?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree. I am glad that the hon. Lady raised that point, which I was about to move on to. Without that justice, the victims will never feel as though they have been well served. They will feel as though they have lost out and there has been no justice.

The inquiry must look at the changing of medical records. Somebody must have issued a clear instruction to do so, because such cover-ups do not happen by themselves. We must find the lines of responsibility whereby people were told, “Delete those records, and don’t tell people about this. Test people, but do not let them know.” All those outstanding questions must be answered, and we must find out what was known, when and by whom. In the search for answers, we must recognise that some questions cannot be answered because the relevant information is held in the United States. Ministers must reach out and speak to their counterparts in other parts of the world to try to find answers. Ways must be found to co-operate with the American Government.

We need to be able to have confidence in our current processes. I understand that the US started screening blood donations in 1983, but we did not start doing so until 1991. Every time I donate blood, I am conscious that the integrity of the system is based on my honesty, at every stage. We must find better ways to ensure that our systems are as robust and secure as possible.

The Government have said that during the inquiry they will reach out to those who receive funds through the current schemes. I hope that that will be done in co-operation with the devolved Administrations where they have responsibility. I encourage the Government to find as many ways as possible to contact people and let them know what is happening. In some cases, the individual concerned may have died and their family members may not be aware of what is going on. We must reach out as widely as possible through advertising, social media and all other means at our disposal to involve as many people as possible in the inquiry.

People must be supported to attend and give evidence to the inquiry. The experience may be very traumatic for some, and they may need counselling or financial support to enable them to attend and to ensure that the required documents reach the inquiry. The Haemophilia Society has said that we must treat such documents with the utmost care and protection. People are, quite rightly, sceptical about how their documents will be treated, and we must enable them to trust that if they submit evidence, it will not be lost. That goes for Government evidence as well as for private evidence belonging to members of the public.

We have waited far too long for justice on this matter. I encourage the Government to maintain the sense of urgency during the inquiry, to make sure that it is not dragged out over many, many years without the victims receiving answers. The victims have waited far too long for justice, and they should not have to wait much longer.

3.12 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the first time that I have had the honour to be in the Chamber when you are sitting in your rightful place in the Chair.

My involvement in the contaminated blood scandal was as, I think, the second Minister for public health the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) had occasion—I nearly said the great misfortune—to come to see. She brought to that meeting all the vim and vigour with which she has pursued this campaign over seven long years. It has taken seven years for justice to be brought about, and that is too long.

I think I am right in saying that when the hon. Lady came to see me, her biggest concern was the burning injustice. To me, something inherent in the matter just felt wrong. I could not put my finger on it, but I was convinced that something was not right. The attitude of some of the people I encountered strengthened that feeling. They wanted to sweep the matter under the carpet, so that they no longer had to deal with it, and move on to other ways of helping the unfortunate victims.

There are two elements to all this. The first great injustice is the terrible scandal itself, which happened decades ago and which Governments—of all three colours, including the coalition Government—failed to grasp as I and others in government wanted them to.

The second great injustice concerns money. I pay full tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who absolutely got it, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton). After the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North asked her question of the Prime Minister last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford and I sat here together. I will not repeat everything that we said to each other, but it boiled down to, “For goodness’ sake”—or words to that effect—“let’s just get on and get this done properly.” We were talking not just about a public inquiry, but, most importantly, about the money. I also pay tribute to Jane Ellison, the previous Minister for public health, because I know that she got this as well.

To get a public inquiry, it was necessary to submit to the Government all the extra material that has been forthcoming in recent times, as further evidence of the need for such an inquiry. No matter how much Ministers and hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House care about something and see why it should be done, political will is required to make it happen. I pay handsome tribute to the Prime Minister for not messing about. I know that she will have been supported by wise words from the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), and from the Secretary of State, who made the case to her. She has grabbed it by the horns, done the right thing and given us a public inquiry.

I want to go further and talk about the second grave injustice. I was reminded of correspondence that I have had with constituents whose son is a haemophiliac. As if being the parents of a haemophiliac was not hard enough, he was diagnosed at the age of nine with AIDS and hep C. He has faced real challenges in his life, which has been blighted by plain prejudice—I have heard horrible stories about the bullying he encountered at school—because of the triple combination from which he suffers. Now he is married, he is the father of a child and he owns his own home. His parents, who have suffered not just injustice but the real difficulty of watching their son suffer, are such wonderful people.

They give you every faith in people's goodness. They have no grievances against anybody; they just want a proper financial package.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talked about the fact that victims receive an ex gratia payment rather than compensation. I remember those schemes, and I was horrified to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) that they have not been sorted out. I beg the Government to scrap them, and, in blunt, simple terms, to give these people the money that they deserve and need: do not give them that money as ex gratia payments; do not make them scrabble around to find bits of paper that they have to take with them, cap in hand, to ask for money. As if they have not suffered enough, how demeaning is it for them to have to go and, as they see it, beg for bits of money?

I urge the Government to get a load of money—these things are possible; we know that it can be done—of the sum that is required. I know that it is not quite so simple, but the next thing to do is to look not at liability, but at quantum, as we lawyers call it. How much would each individual, or their widow or survivor, be entitled to if liability was not an issue? Then, I ask the Government to do the right thing. I do believe that they can find the money. I know that many in government, including the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, absolutely got this. For whatever reason, his term in office was not the right time to do something, but he understood the human side, as did many of us.

It is now time to sort out the second grave injustice—the money. Get the money together, put it in a pot, decide quantum and give these people everything that they deserve and need. Then, finally, the last grave injustice and national scandal will have been sorted out and solved. Of that, we will all be able to be proud.

3.19 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), I became engaged in this issue after 2010, when constituents contacted me, and one constituent in particular—a remarkable man called Andrew March, whom I shall say a little about in a moment.

I feel slightly ashamed that I did not fully understand the utter tragedy of contaminated blood, which has not been with us for seven years; it has been with us for more than 30 years. As a country, we need to own up to the fact that we do not do these things very well. The same is true of Hillsborough and, in many ways, of Grenfell. These are not matters that have happened and then been dealt with appropriately. They are things that we have failed to address over years, if not decades.

I would say one or two things on the remit and type of inquiry, because these are multiple failings. Yes, of course, there is the failing that led to the infections and the multiple infections in the first place, but, until recently the Government would not even mention the word “negligence”. Now, I am pleased to say, due in large part to what Andy Burnham has done, we are talking about criminality, but it has taken a long time to get there. On how the victims have been treated by the establishment, again, one could make comparisons with what happened with Hillsborough over many years, such as the way that they have been ignored and badly

treated. In relation to recompense and financing, that includes the fact that the various trusts and schemes, as well as the quantum involved and the administration, have been appalling.

I have said to Minister after Minister over the past seven years that a bespoke solution is needed. We are talking about a finite and decreasing number of people, and we need a bespoke solution for each of those individuals and families, because everybody is in a different position according to their circumstances, health and personal needs.

I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, and to many other Members—I am surprised that the all-party group does not have 650 members, rather than 111—but the real credit goes to the victims themselves, who had to fight and fight and fight to get very little.

I have felt frustration taking part in every debate on the subject over the past seven years and during the endless meetings with Ministers through the all-party group, so I am glad that the Minister has said that his mind is open on the type of inquiry. We need an inquiry with powers, such as an inquiry held under the Inquiries Act 2005 with powers to call witnesses and interrogate them under oath. We need the forensic skills that a judge would bring, but at the same time the inquiry needs to have credibility and trust. We do not want to start making the same mistakes that we made with the sex abuse inquiries and are beginning to make, I am afraid, in the Grenfell inquiry.

The other day, I was listening to Dr Richard Stone on the radio. He assisted the Macpherson inquiry and was trusted by the local community. We need here a combination of those forensic skills and people who know the issues and know the people involved, and are trusted by them. We have to have full access to documentation. We have to have proper rights of audience for the victims and their families. We have to have full representation. That means legal aid. I hope that in the same way that the Government are now discovering their neglect of social housing over many years has been a mistake, they will discover that the cuts in legal aid are also a mistake and are false economies.

I say that while paying tribute to what the Minister has said today, but remembering that in the previous debate, which Andy Burnham held in this House only some two months ago, we were told that a public inquiry was not appropriate. Let us consider just some of the issues that are being dealt with here: non-consensual testing; victims not being informed of the results of that testing; non-consensual research involving previously untested patients; people being informed, if they were informed, in hospital corridors or through the post; and minors being told without their parents being present. All this was happening in our country in the relatively recent past.

Then there is the cover up—the allegations in relation to documents being destroyed and people not being prepared even to answer questions. All that has to be addressed through this inquiry.

Given the time, may I end by talking about Andrew March, as a large part of my involvement in the investigation is down to him? With his consent, I shall discuss personal details, which, courageously, he wants in the public realm because he wants us to get to the bottom of this. In a letter to me earlier today, he wrote:

[Andy Slaughter]

“I have been looking at my medical notes, and have discovered that essentially, I am one of the patients who was not informed by their hospital (in my case Coventry and Warwick Hospital) that I had non-A non-B hepatitis throughout the 80s, and similarly, I was not informed that I had Hepatitis C when the hospital tested me without myself or my parents knowing”—

he was a minor at the time—

“despite testing me years earlier, without myself or my parents knowing. I only found out ‘by accident’ in October 1992, when I transferred my care to the Royal Free in London”.

Andrew quotes from the letter from the consultant at the Royal Free, who said:

“On further discussion he did not seem to be aware that he was Hepatitis C antibody positive and we therefore spent some considerable time discussing our understanding of Hepatitis C infection and the implications of antibody positivity.”

Andrew says:

“I am a severe haemophiliac, and one of only 250 HIV positive haemophiliacs who remain alive today. Of those originally infected in the 1980s, more than three-quarters have died during the course of the past 3 decades. Many of them were my friends.

I was also infected with hepatitis B and C, and despite treatment, I continue to live with the adverse effects of cirrhosis of the liver...I am also one of the 3,872 haemophiliacs (and persons with bleeding disorders), who have been notified as being considered ‘At-Risk’ of vCJD (the human form of Mad Cow Disease).”

This avoidable tragedy has completely transformed Andrew’s life and put him at huge disadvantage. He has never received a proper explanation. He has never been properly compensated. Despite that, he has devoted his life to ensuring justice for all the victims. We owe it to him and to all those other victims—many of them, unfortunately, already dead—to drill down forensically into this tragedy, and to do so reasonably speedily and in a way that leaves nothing unexposed. If we do not do that, a reducing number of people will get justice.

3.27 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as this is the first time I have spoken with you in the Chair.

I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). The case he mentioned is almost unreal, and few of us could believe it to be true if we had not lived through this issue ourselves. I pay tribute to all the campaigners up and down the country who have worked so hard to get this issue on the agenda—in particular the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), but also many Members from across the House. This shows us pulling together and how Parliament should work. It has taken a long time, but we can make a difference. I hope this really will make a difference to those victims who have suffered, and that today’s announcement will change people’s lives once the public inquiry gets going. I would very much like to thank the Prime Minister and the Government for listening and for responding over this tragic affair.

When I became MP for Taunton Deane, one of the first people who came to see me, who does not want to be named, visited my surgery to tell me the desperate story of how his whole life had been blighted by being treated—inadvertently—with infected blood, as in so many other examples that we have heard today. I was quite naive. I had never engaged with anybody in that

situation before, and I was deeply shocked by his account of all that he had gone through for his whole life. Being given infected blood had plagued and blighted his life. He was ill, of course, but also his quality of life was affected. One of the effects that resonated most with me was that it affected his relationship with his son—he did not have the time to spend with him. We all take for granted that we can leave our children an inheritance, even if it is not very much—some money for a car or a share of a house. My constituent was distraught and felt he had not done justice to his son because his illness meant that he had a problem holding down jobs. Not only was he suffering from the blight of the illness, but he carried that guilt with him.

My constituent raised two practical concerns with me about the system. First, he felt that the level of financial support was not sufficient to enable him to feel secure and he was constantly struggling. Secondly, the scheme that administered his payment—the Macfarlane Trust, which other hon. Members have mentioned—did not work effectively and as a result did not adequately support those it was designed to help.

I have spoken on this issue several times in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall, as well as privately to the Department of Health. I was pleased to hear that the Government had listened to our voices and it is welcome that this autumn a new single scheme will be introduced, with additional funding of £125 million, to replace the complicated system of five different support schemes. The devil will be in the detail, but I know that the Government will take into consideration all the comments from the consultation. I hope that that will iron out some of the problems that so many people have struggled with and make life better for the victims.

I am also pleased with the moves that the Government have made on transparency—another issue that hon. Members have mentioned. I appreciate the serious concerns about how this has been handled in the past, but I know that Ministers are keen from now on to make all information readily available. That has been promised in the inquiry announced today.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because I, too, have a constituent who has been infected by contaminated blood since the 1960s. He will be delighted with the public inquiry, because he wants to know why it happened and how he can gain access to proper compensation. Transparency is vital in this case.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I could not agree more. Transparency should be the nub of the inquiry, because it is important for my constituent and for all those who have had their lives changed forever through no fault of their own. We must remember that they have not brought it on themselves.

I thank the Government for listening and giving the issue the attention it deserves. I also thank them for more than doubling the Department’s annual spend in this area. Let us make sure that the funding gets to the people who really need it. I thank the Government for announcing the inquiry as I will be able to give my constituent a glimmer of hope both that the Prime Minister has understood the issues and called for the inquiry, and that we will get the inquiry right. Public inquiries are rare events and we need to make sure this

one works. New evidence will emerge, and I urge that all relevant and commercially sensitive documents are made available. With the right framework, progress can be made and—I hope—the right thing done at last. I urge the Minister to ensure above all that the inquiry does not drag on too long. For those who have suffered for too long already, time is of the essence.

3.33 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I want to speak in this debate on behalf of my constituents Lin Ashcroft and the Smith family, victims of the contaminated blood scandal.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on an excellent maiden speech. She rightly highlighted the importance of the campaign and her local campaigners, and we look forward to hearing many more speeches from her. I also add to the tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). We are having this debate because of her, and she has worked tirelessly on the issue with other hon. Members. She has a parliamentary life well spent on the issue, let alone all the other matters that she has campaigned on. But she has done this for the victims, and, in welcoming the Government's announcement of a public inquiry today, I agree with her that it is so important that the families are at the heart of it. The inquiry has been a very long time coming; we failed this community many, many times, and they need to be at the heart of it and have confidence in it.

It is absolutely shameful that 45 years have passed since the first people were infected with HIV and hepatitis from NHS-supplied contaminated blood and blood products, yet we have still not got to the truth for the members of the community who are affected. They have been let down so often, but they still come here relentlessly, all these years later, to see Ministers and lobby MPs to fight for justice. I pay tribute to them for their strength. I remember a family telling me, not so long ago, that in the end they had to stop going to the funerals of the friends whom they had made as part of this campaign, because it had become too heartbreaking: there were just too many funerals to go to. I think that is really sad.

As the former Member of Parliament for Leigh said in his last speech in this place, there is plenty of new evidence that backs up what campaigners have known and felt in their bones for many years: that the risks posed by contaminated blood were known by the authorities and pharmaceutical companies at the time but it was still used; that people were used for testing and as guinea pigs; and that efforts were made to suppress that truth. Let us remember that these were people who went to the NHS for treatment and were infected by blood provided by the NHS—provided by the state. They have had to fight for years for that to be acknowledged, and no fault has ever been admitted by either the Government or the pharmaceutical companies that supplied the contaminated blood products. It was said that that was because no one could have known about the problem at the time but, as a result of the work of campaigners, Members and the media, we now have that new evidence that risks were known. The inquiry must start now, so that we can get to the truth once and for all.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, more than 2,400 people have died and the lives of thousands more have been wrecked. I want to talk about just one of those people, Colin Smith from Newport in my constituency. He was one of the youngest victims of the contaminated blood scandal, and what happened to him illustrates just why the inquiry cannot come quickly enough.

Colin went into hospital in 1983 when he was eight months old with a minor ear condition. As a haemophiliac he received factor VIII, which the family learned, following a freedom of information request, had come from a batch from a prison in Arkansas. He spent his short life fighting illness. He died, aged seven, of AIDS and hepatitis C in 1990. The family did not know he had hepatitis C until three years after his death: it had been kept secret, as so much was kept hidden. I hope that that will be examined in the inquiry, because people like Haydn Lewis, who was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), had to battle and battle to obtain such information.

Colin died aged seven in his mum's arms, weighing about the same as a baby. I have told his story before in the Chamber. It is a heartbreakingly tragic story, but telling such stories is an important reminder of why we are here today. It is also an important reason for having a public inquiry. We now know something that Colin's family knew in their hearts, I think, for many years, but have since outlined on "Panorama" and in *Private Eye*. One of the recently unearthed letters written by Colin's haemophilia specialist in 1983 recorded that, following his minor incident,

"without any evidence of intracranial bleeding the child was still given factor 8".

The specialist added that

"all these materials carry the risk of hepatitis but this is something haemophiliacs have to accept".

He said that he would keep Colin under "close observation as months go by".

Six years later, after Colin had died, the same specialist wrote to pharmaceutical companies saying that he could not supply any more "samples" because Colin was no longer at his facility. Colin's family were not aware of that until much later. That and other evidence needs to be put before the public inquiry so that witnesses can be called under oath and all documents can be disclosed, because it indicates that the risks of using this blood—supplied by profit-making American companies—were known in 1980 or earlier, three years before it was given to Colin.

Colin's tribute on the Tainted Blood website says:

"Thousands of people, like Colin... didn't make it this far. He never had the chance to join the cubs, play football for his school, have a girlfriend, go travelling or get married... Instead, his short life was filled with hospitals, doctors and illness. He was just a little boy, but a very special one who we, at TB, always keep in mind as we campaign."

He is in my mind every day, because when at home in my constituency I often drive past the Smith's house, with my eight-year-old son sat in the car next to me, and I imagine how I would feel if this had happened to me. So I just say this to the Minister: would I have been happy if there was a public apology and would I have been happy with the limited financial support that people felt they had to beg for, or would I want to

[*Jessica Morden*]

finally get to the truth? Nothing can bring back Colin and others, but we can at least have a public inquiry that gets this right. We need to get it right this time, because Colin's family and others have been through so much over the years that we cannot let them down again.

3.40 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It was interesting to hear the reflections of the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and the personal stories she recounted. That was what brought me to this issue two years ago when I was first elected. Someone came into my office who was heavily disabled, but who should have been fit and healthy. They were relatively young—not much older than me—but their whole life had been dominated by a series of treatments they received back in the 1980s.

This is not an issue of someone having had a couple of opportunities taken away, having lost a couple of quid, or needing to work a little longer before finally being able to retire. This is about people who literally had their whole lives, which were going reasonably, taken away, with all opportunities removed. For many—about 2,500 people—literally the end of their life was caused by a treatment programme that should have helped to cure them.

I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that doctors in a hospital or an operating theatre would not be able to look at every single thing; they have to rely on the agencies that vet and certify things as safe. Clearly, in this instance, there was a huge failure.

I am pleased about the progress that has been made over the past couple of years. When I first spoke on this, I remarked that I suspected that my predecessor, at the time he was elected in 1997, would not have expected his successor in 2015 to still be talking about the issue. It is therefore very welcome that we will finally have a public inquiry to examine exactly what went wrong.

I was reassured to hear the Minister saying that there will be genuine consultation around the terms of reference, as they will be very important. If there is evidence of criminal wrongdoing, no aspect of the inquiry should prevent people from being held to account for any criminal liability in a court of law. It would be a great pity if the inquiry that finally brought about justice and answers also prevented people from being held to account in a criminal court.

I was reassured to hear the Minister's reference to the Hillsborough inquiries—obviously charges have followed on from that, although I will not go into them—and I hope that the same pattern can be established for this inquiry if there is evidence to support it. I am sure that we would all join the calls that anyone with evidence should hand it over to the police immediately. People certainly should not be withholding anything that would be of interest to the police and might identify whether individuals need to be held to account.

It is right that there will be proper consultation on the form of the inquiry. It certainly will need to be able to compel people to take part and provide evidence. I was reassured to hear that the Minister is carefully considering those issues, because that could make quite a difference.

If there is an awareness that criminal sanctions might be available but people can just choose not to take part, that might have a negative impact on getting to the truth of what has happened.

It is appropriate that there is some form of time limit on getting to the answers. We can all think of examples of public inquiries that took a long time and seemed to drag on forever. Although people have had to wait decades for this process, there is a limit to how much longer many of the victims—and, in many cases, the children and families of those who have already passed on—will be able to wait for the final answers about what happened.

Lady Hermon: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Prime Minister recently made the wise announcement that the Government would introduce an independent public advocate to help victims following disasters. Does he agree that it would be wholly appropriate for this independent public advocate to be appointed in time to represent bereaved families and victims right across the UK in this very sensitive and difficult case?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. I am sure that the Minister will have heard it and will wish to consider, as part of the consultation, how the inquiry is structured and how the victims are represented. I can imagine, given the victims' experience over the past 30 years, that they might have strong views on whether they should be represented by a state-appointed person or someone they know themselves. It is important that the way in which they are represented should be determined through consultation. I am sure that all points will be carefully considered to ensure that these people are represented appropriately.

In my constituency, three ladies have raised this matter with me constantly: Jean Hill, Michelle Digby and Margaret Murray. They have been determined to pursue the matter, to find answers and to reach justice. Even while I have been in the House for the Minister's speech, Margaret has been in touch to ask when the compensation payments will be made, given that the forms were sent out over 12 months ago. It is important that we resolve all these issues as well as finding the answers to what happened 30 years ago.

I welcome the Minister's statement today, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on her pursuit of this matter and on securing the debate. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has been diligent in pursuing these cases. I hope that those who have suffered for too long can finally get the answers that they deserve and have an absolute right to receive.

3.46 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the first chance I have had to speak under your chairmanship, and I congratulate you. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on her maiden speech. She made a powerful intervention on behalf of her constituents, and I wish her well in her parliamentary career, which I hope will be at least as long as that of her predecessor, Andrew Smith, who

served in the House for more than 30 years. It is also appropriate for me to pay tribute, as have many hon. Members, to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on behalf of all the Members who have supported her in the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, which has more than 111 members from both sides of the House. The group has looked at the real effects and causes of this scandal, as well as examining the recompense and support given to the people who have suffered as a result of it, and I should like to comment on those issues today.

There are two clear issues that we need to address. The first covers the history of these events, what caused them, what could have been done to prevent them and who is liable and responsible. The second covers the question of what the state does for those who have no blame in this matter, and what type of support is given to those who are now facing the challenges resulting from the scandal. I do not expect the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), to be able to answer all these questions today. It is clear that the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and other hon. Members, and the letter from the six party leaders, have focused the Government's mind on how to respond. I accept and understand that, but it is none the less important to put some challenges to the Minister about the form of the inquiry. The Welsh Government in Cardiff publicly called for an inquiry in January, and I know that they will be interested to know that they have the support of the House here today for that response.

I raise these issues because, like all hon. Members who have spoken today, I have constituents for whom the impact of the contaminated blood scandal has run through their lives over the past 30 years. They wish to remain anonymous, and that is quite right, but I have met them and I have seen the impact that it has had on their lives. This involves not only the trauma of the people who were infected and have since died in large numbers but the fact that people cannot get insurance and often cannot maintain stable employment. They have the problem of not knowing whether they are going to live or for how long, and not knowing what will happen to their relatives when they die. I have constituents with young children who might have to face the consequences of their early death at any time.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case, and he has just mentioned a point that I was going to make. Many of the people who were badly affected have not been catered for to date. They include constituents of mine whose father was infected and who died. They ended up in a children's home and their lives have been totally devastated, yet they are not within this process. They should be.

David Hanson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The constituents who have approached me are concerned about what will happen to their children in the event of their death. They are concerned about the lack of insurance and the costs as a whole. This worry has been mentioned already, but in one case the records relating to the time of the infection have been lost by the state so some people may not be able hold anyone liable

because the records have simply disappeared. I hope that the inquiry looks in detail at that those challenges.

I was pleased to hear from the Minister that the inquiry will be UK wide. The scandal happened before devolution, but I have constituents in Wales who were infected in Liverpool, which is under the Department of Health's jurisdiction. I have constituents who were infected in Wales who live in Wales. I have also had correspondence with people who were infected in Wales but now live in other constituencies. It is important that we look at the picture as a whole. The Minister has given some indication of it today, but I will be interested to hear about how the devolved Administrations will be involved under the ultimate terms of reference. I want to hear about how the consultation will happen, what the terms of reference will be, and what opportunities there will be for input into the process. My constituents will want to ensure that we get to who is responsible, why it happened, what could have been done and, ultimately, whether any compensation or redress is needed to help meet the challenges they face, such as the one mentioned by the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly).

Given that it will be a Hillsborough-style inquiry, it is important that the Minister—not today, but in due course—clearly sets out not only the terms of reference, but the terms of engagement. I was going to make the same point as the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) in that, to be frank, my constituents want to try to get on with their lives. Something happened to them when they were younger over which they had no control, but it has not engulfed their entire lives, so it would be helpful if the Government set out how victims can engage with the public inquiry in due course. It may be possible to engage through organisations such as the Haemophilia Society and others, but how will individuals who may not be involved with any organisation get representation? They may need financial support for that representation—perhaps they could have the independent advocate that was mentioned by the hon. Member for North Down—and they need to be able to put their case to the inquiry effectively.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I am also pleased to speak on this occasion with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Picking up on my right hon. Friend's point, a constituent of mine called Michael from Runcorn wants justice, but he wants justice that involves all the families. He wants them to be engaged and to be able to shape this Hillsborough-style inquiry. I welcome the inquiry that the Prime Minister and the Minister have announced, but people are impatient for justice that is shaped by the victims.

David Hanson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The point that I want to finish on—*[Interruption.]* Does the Minister want to intervene?

Mr Dunne: Briefly. I remind the right hon. Gentleman, who is making some important points, that we intend to contact all the families who are in touch with us through the different schemes to alert them to today's announcement, so that they will have the opportunity to contribute to our determination of the best form of inquiry. On the hon. Gentleman's second point, it will be for the inquiry, once it is established, to determine how it engages with people, and those involved will be interested in any advice from Members or others.

David Hanson: I am grateful for that intervention, because that reassures me and my constituents about the process. I simply say that confidence, transparency and ensuring that people feel like they can have their say properly and effectively will be key. The inquiry should also have some timescale, so that people know how much of their lives it will take up. If the Minister can do those things and perhaps inform the House about the inquiry's budget, staffing and the other things that we would expect in any inquiry, that will help to reassure people that the Government are not just responding to events and pressure from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, but are keen on getting a positive outcome for the innocent victims of what is a national scandal. I hope that the Minister will keep the House and, in particular, those who have been infected informed, because at the end of the day this is about their lives and their futures. The uncertainties that they have faced demand the compassionate and considered support that I am sure the Minister will give them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I do not want to impose a formal time limit, but I would ask Members to try to keep to four minutes. I will not then have to impose a formal time limit.

3.55 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I join other Members in paying tribute to all those affected by this terrible tragedy, to the families of those affected and to hon. Friends and hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). I also pay tribute to the new hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for delivering her maiden speech in this important debate.

I speak today to give a voice to a constituent, who understandably wishes to remain anonymous. He was born with haemophilia and has had to endure that terrible chronic condition, the treatment for which has poisoned him—he has been infected with both HIV and hepatitis C. Those infusions have condemned him to a life of pain, of serious medication, which has its own side-effects, of major surgery and of worry. “Worry” seems an inadequate word to describe the constant weight that must be on his mind, and on the minds of those who love him, each and every day of his life.

This tragedy has affected every single day and every single aspect of his life, from his marriage to his ability to work and his family. He told me recently that he and his wife have told their grown-up child of his condition and his infections because, as he told me, “when is the right time to tell your child that you have HIV and hepatitis C?” So my constituent welcomes today’s announcement. He asks for a Hillsborough-style inquiry because, as others have said, people affected by this do not have time on their side.

I must declare an interest as a barrister. I hope the public inquiry will ensure that public money is directed towards those who need it most, namely the victims and

their families, not towards massively expensive tribunal costs. I state that warning to any of my former colleagues in the legal profession.

I am conscious that some of my colleagues wish to speak in this debate, so I will finish by talking about a school photograph that my constituent brought into a surgery. It was like any other school photograph—children smiling, and with teachers on either end of the row—but this photograph was different. It showed my constituent’s class at the special school he had to attend because of his medical condition. Eight of his school friends had haemophilia. Four of those eight are now dead as a result of contaminated blood infections, and another is so ill that, in his early 50s, he is forced to live in a specialist care home because of how his body has been left.

My constituent and the thousands of others we have heard about today are the victims of a terrible episode in our national life. They have fought for justice for 30 years, and I thank this Prime Minister and this Government for listening and acting. I hope this inquiry delivers answers for those affected.

3.59 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): This is also the first time I have had the pleasure of speaking in this House with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, so may I welcome you to your position? I also echo what has been said in thanking the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for being able to secure this important debate. Let me also say that it was a pleasure to be in the Chamber for the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). I congratulate her on taking her seat.

I am not going to take up too much of the House’s time in this debate, but I want to draw the House’s attention to the case of a constituent of mine, one that I have raised in this House before; I have been fortunate to be called to speak on this issue in a number of different debates. My constituent Sue Threakall has been communicating with me for more than two years. She was one of the first people to come to me after my election in 2015 to raise this issue, and this was one of the first cases I decided to take up and follow. Other colleagues have made this point, but I, too, have to feel a sense of shame that I was not aware of the background to this story before I started to hear some of the personal testimony.

I merely intend to read out part of an email that Sue Threakall sent to me yesterday, when it became clear that this emergency debate was going to be held—I have been in constant touch with her. She asked me briefly to share with the House her story, and I am doing so because it says in more powerful words than anyone else could why it is so important that we have this full public inquiry. At the time of this email, we were not aware of the Government’s announcement, which I warmly welcome. I pay tribute to not only my hon. Friend the Minister of State, but the Prime Minister for driving this forward.

Let me share with Members what Sue Threakall wrote to me in her email yesterday:

“My husband, Bob Threakall, died in 1991, aged 47. Despite being a severe haemophiliac, he had lived a relatively normal life until he was given commercial blood products. Following that his health, and his life, followed a deep and dark downhill path.

He contracted Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and HIV. He died a terrible death, which I believe was wholly avoidable.

He was NEVER informed about the risks known at the time of imported Factor 8.

He was NEVER told he had Hepatitis C, and indeed I only found out myself a few years ago.

His HIV test result was withheld from him for many months, thus leaving me at risk. I was fortunate...many women were not.

From Autumn 1990 until two days before he died, months later, with shadowing on his lungs and despite being at high risk of contracting pneumonia, he was left UNTREATED.

He never had the chance of seeing his eldest son married, nor met his grandchildren.

He didn't see his middle son graduate from university.

He didn't see his youngest son pass his 11 plus and go to grammar school.

Following his death our family basically fell apart. Grief sent us in different directions and for many years we were completely broken. The fallout is still there today, bubbling away, just below the surface."

Sue writes in conclusion:

"It is my firm opinion, following campaigning and researching since 1985, that haemophiliacs were used as guinea pigs. I believe that, had people acted differently at the time, Bob, and so many others, would almost certainly be alive and well today."

I found Sue's email extremely moving, and I have repeated her words to the House today because they say better than almost any of the rest of us could why the decision that has been taken by the Government to hold this public inquiry is so welcome. I will be following this process carefully to ensure that the form of the inquiry is the best it can be, so that victims and survivors, such as my constituent, can get the truth, fairness and justice that they deserve.

4.3 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I wish to start by echoing what has been said by so many in paying tribute to the victims of this tragedy, their families and those many hon. Members who have campaigned tirelessly for such a long time to ensure that this public inquiry takes place. I also pay tribute to our Prime Minister who, after so many people have not, has listened to these concerns and has organised this full public inquiry.

As a doctor, I prescribe blood products—and that will be continuing every day—often for people who are not in the position to make decisions for themselves. I prescribe blood for babies who have been born very prematurely and for children who have cancer—people who are not in the position to make these decisions, just like the youngsters with haemophilia and other constituents who have been mentioned.

This is an issue of trust. It is important that when people go into hospital and receive treatment they are able to trust that the risk-benefit decision that is made with them or, if they are very small or very unwell, on their behalf, is made on the basis of all the known facts and all the available information. With the contaminated blood scandal, it appears that that was not the case. Despite the fact that people knew that HIV, hepatitis and hepatitis B were transmissible through blood products, that information was not made available to the people receiving such products. The bloods were not being properly screened, and even when, as I understand it, bloods were being screened elsewhere, these products were being used on people in the UK.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Trust is the key word—trust and faith, if people have that, in the inquiry. Every story is different. My constituent Barry Flynn is a twin. His twin is not here, but on his behalf he wants to be able to trust the inquiry. He wants the victims to be heard and to decide the remit, and he wants their evidence to be taken. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the way to get trust?

Dr Johnson: Absolutely; the victims and their families have the right and deserve to know what happened. They deserve answers to their questions. They need to know when people knew that these blood products could be causing harm and, if those people did know, why the products were still given.

The House should be under no illusions—I am sure it will not be, after listening to many eloquent Members describe their constituents' cases—about the suffering people have been through, losing their family members. There is a stigma that still exists today around many of these medical conditions, particularly HIV. Other people, such as victims' wives and children, have been put at risk, and many others still suffer today from poor health.

I very much welcome the announcement of the public inquiry, which I hope will get to the bottom of all the issues. I hope that the victims receive the compensation they deserve.

4.7 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): May I, too, welcome you to your new role, Madam Deputy Speaker? I am absolutely delighted. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on her brilliant maiden speech and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for being such a doughty champion of this issue in Parliament.

This debate has been conducted in a way we can all recognise as hugely positive. It has been very constructive, which I think is what people out there in the country would expect—they would expect us to conduct this debate responsibly because this issue very much affects people's lives. I am acutely aware of that because one of my constituents who has been caught up in this tragedy is Sue Wathen, a local teacher whose husband is a councillor. They are friends I care about very much. Rather like several of my colleagues, I was shocked when, shortly after I was elected, Sue and Peter asked me to go around to their house, where they told me all about the things they had gone through and the difficulties that Sue was facing in trying to access the Harvoni treatment that she so desperately needed.

I know that Sue will be sat at home watching this debate and will welcome the Government's announcement no end. Things went so disastrously wrong in the past and we need to get to the bottom of that. A particular shock to Sue was that she was diagnosed as having her condition after some 30 years. It was a bombshell: she was marking books in her office at school when she received the telephone call telling her that she had this condition.

The most welcome thing about today's announcement is the firm commitment to ensure that the victims of this tragedy are properly listened to and are really involved in shaping the inquiry. There are lessons to be

[Tom Pursglove]

learned from what happened with Hillsborough. It does not surprise me in the slightest that the Prime Minister is so committed to addressing this issue: we have seen her take up a number of injustices, of which Hillsborough is one example. I hope that we can get to the bottom of this particular tragedy. The victims know how it affects them on a day-to-day basis. They know what the consequences are for their families and they should be listened to and encouraged to help shape the inquiry.

One key point that I suspect will come up in these discussions in the weeks and months ahead is access to treatment. Unfortunately, from time to time, NHS bureaucracy gets in the way of people accessing treatments. In Sue's case, we went through a multitude of dramas to get the Harvoni treatment that she so desperately needed. In the end, we were successful. I am very grateful to Ministers for all their efforts in helping to achieve that. I remember what Sue said to me when we first had that early conversation. She said, "I am not worried about compensation; I just want to get better." There is a lot in that. These are all issues that the public inquiry should consider and address. I welcome it very much and look forward to the debates ahead.

4.10 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Like other hon. Members, Madam Deputy Speaker, I welcome you to the Chair. I also wish to put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for securing this debate. In the short time that I have been a Member of this place, I have been struck by her determination and perseverance with this campaign. Clearly, it is an issue that goes right across the Chamber. I also wish to thank and to recognise all those Members who are not in the Chamber today or who have perhaps moved on following the election for playing a part in this campaign. That includes David Cameron, who, at his last Prime Minister's questions, said that he wanted more to be done on this very important issue.

This is a very important matter to many of us both inside and outside this House. As we have heard today, so many constituents have been affected by this issue and are still affected today. It was first brought to my attention about a year ago when a constituent came to my surgery, but the issue that she raised was slightly different. We have heard a lot of stories about victims and those who are suffering as a result of the contaminated blood tragedy, but this lady came to raise the issue of support for the spouses of those who have died from contaminated blood. She had a number of questions and concerns, particularly around the discretionary payment fund. In particular, she wanted to know exactly what her position was, saying that she felt as though she was in limbo when it came to her monthly payments.

This is a tragedy that means so much to so many people. Through no fault of their own, they have suddenly found themselves in hardship and really suffering as a result of what has happened. We know that this tragedy goes back to the 1970s and 1980s and that it is an issue that has spanned several Governments. It is a long-running issue, but for those families in my constituency and across the country, it is still a priority for them and

rightly so. From what we have heard from the Minister today and from the Prime Minister in her statement, I sense that it is still a priority for the Government as well. We should continue to provide support for those affected by this tragedy.

I am very conscious of time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will draw my comments to a close by saying that I hope that this inquiry brings together all the parties, including the families and the victims, because, after all the time that has elapsed, there are still families who want answers, and a sense of conclusion and closure to this tragic issue.

4.13 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I, too, welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have a confession, or an apology, to make: when I was first briefed on this issue, I put it into the "too difficult to deal with" category—perhaps it was too niche, too much of the past. It lacked a contemporary feel to it. I was wrong and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) has proved the point today, and she is to be congratulated on that.

Listening to this debate, I have been reflecting on the fact that so many of our constituents view this place through that very narrow prism of 30 minutes or so on a Wednesday. This debate has shown Parliament at its best—Members from across the parties with an interest in an issue coming together to try to find a solution. I welcome the words of the hon. Lady in relation to my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister. As a number of hon. Members have pointed out, many Ministers have listened, and just as many Ministers listened to the tragedy of Hillsborough. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister seems to have something in her essence, as she does not listen but decides to act in a fair, calm and sensible way, always in the pursuit of justice for our constituents and fellow citizens.

This issue speaks to a time long past—a different time for procedures, practices and medical processes. It certainly predates patients' rights and, as a number of hon. Members have said, the devolution settlement, which will doubtless throw up challenges for the inquiry. However, it is also a contemporary issue, as it causes pain, suffering and anxiety, as many colleagues across the House have referenced. I strongly welcome the Government's decision to move towards a single payment scheme. Having five silos to which people can try to apply and have to justify their needs to—my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) alluded to such cases—has added indignity to injustice.

Money is not everything, as a number of colleagues have said. Yes, the ill health unnecessarily—and probably avoidably—experienced by sufferers as a result of contaminated blood means that they must bear greater medical costs as well as greater social and lifestyle costs. But the inquiry is crucial. I confess that I am sanguine, on a personal level, as to whether there should be a panel or a judge-led inquiry. If the latter—I agree entirely with the Minister that this has to be done in concert with the survivors to identify the best way—I hope that we can rally around the authenticity of the judge and not question their motivation or bona fides.

The sufferers do not have time on their side, and we must move forward quickly. This is a campaign that has festered too long.

I conclude by congratulating again the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North. I hope that people who are suffering, who are bereaved, who are in pain, or who are anxious today are in some way sustained and comforted by a brighter glimmer of the hope of justice at the end of the tunnel.

4.17 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Government very much for the announcement. I am new to the issue, and I pay tribute to hon. Members who have done much work in previous years, including the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), and others who had the wisdom to champion this cause when it was not fashionable to do so.

Islanders who have been affected will be relieved that all the truth behind the scandal will come out. I suspect that some of it will make for very difficult listening indeed. I did not know whether I should speak in this debate, but I decided to do so after listening to the moving experiences of some of my residents, who asked me to come to the Chamber and listen to the debate. I am glad that I have done so, and I thank them for that suggestion.

I represent residents, as we all do, who have lived with this for decades, including people who contracted illnesses linked to contaminated blood, some of whom were infected when only nine years old. One resident, Janet Sheppeson from Freshwater in the west of my constituency, worries not only for herself but for members of her family. She told me that her life had been turned upside down by the contaminated blood:

“My infection has caused me to suffer from a disabling and debilitating autoimmune disease. You may be amazed, as I am, to know that, despite all this, I was refused funding for the new generation, direct-acting antiviral treatment for Hepatitis C by NHS England and was obliged to buy it myself earlier this year.” Not only do the residents I represent suffer but they feel that the NHS, which let them down in the first place along with others, has not provided the support that it should have done, which concerns me.

The light of investigation, whether by the Government, media or interested parties, is critical to making progress in our society, to upholding justice and to lessen suffering. Those inquiries are often difficult, as we have seen from Hillsborough and may well see from Grenfell Tower and others. Such inquiries ask questions of those in authority and test the system. The outcome should be justice and, as other hon. Members have said, trust in the system and in people here, who are doing the right thing and battling for their constituents.

Islanders want to know the answers to a series of questions, some of which have been asked. I will not repeat those, but there are two or three outstanding questions. Will the Government at some point explain the difference between a statutory and a Hillsborough-like inquiry, especially for my constituents who are interested in participating in it? How will the widows and families of the 2,400 people who have already died be treated as participants, and how will their financial and other

claims be handled? The potential criminal elements have to be investigated to their ultimate conclusion. Will the Minister reassure us that the inquiry will be time-limited, while being as comprehensive as possible?

4.21 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for calling the debate and for her indefatigable campaigning on the subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on an excellent maiden speech; I am confident that it was the beginning of many excellent contributions in this Chamber.

Many colleagues on both sides of the House have been tireless in their advocacy for the victims of this unspeakable tragedy over many years. I am a relative newcomer to the issue, but I speak today on behalf of my constituent Jackie Britton, who lives in Portchester. Jackie has met me on many occasions, for she, too, has not given up on this fight. She contracted hepatitis C in 1982 from a blood transfusion during childbirth, but she was only diagnosed in 2011. For many years, she has been afflicted with and has suffered from a debilitating illness. Her daughter has also been very ill with various medical conditions.

I am sure that Jackie would welcome today’s news about a public inquiry into this matter. It is clear that the Government are seriously reflecting the concerns and voices of those who have been tragically affected by the incident. The inquiry is the latest in a series of actions taken by this Government over several years. The Government have increased the amount of money spent on payments to victims to record levels since 2016, with an additional £125 million in support funding for those who need it. I am pleased that the Government announced last year that they would reform the package of support measures for those affected. For the first time, almost 2,500 beneficiaries with chronic hepatitis C were eligible to receive an annual payment of £3,500 a year. That progress results from listening and action on the part of the Government.

I will conclude my comments because I am aware that other colleagues want to contribute. There is nothing that anybody can do to change the past, and this awful incident and tragedy, but I hope, for the sake of Jackie and all those victims about whom we have heard today, that the inquiry—the process of discovering the truth and bringing some justice to those affected—will provide some solace and finality to this heartbreaking tragedy.

4.24 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Welcome to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker, and thank you for squeezing me in at the end of the debate.

For the many reasons explained in the many excellent speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House, I have been really impressed and pleased that the Government have thought this issue through afresh, which is significant, given the previous inquiries and many debates on it. The apology given by the Minister today was an important step, which will be appreciated by the victims.

I note what the Minister said on the need to consult on the form of the inquiry. Given the numerous positions on that issue alone, he has made the right decision to

[*Mr Jonathan Djanogly*]

engage with the affected groups. However, I hope that an element of urgency will now be forced into this process to move things forward, and that we think always about the victims and how they have been waiting so long.

I hope the inquiry will look into the decision to acquire these products in the first place and into who was responsible—that is, at the period before anyone in the UK became infected.

This is a tragic story from start to finish. I acknowledge the persistence and total commitment of my affected constituents and those involved in the wider campaign to seek the truth. It is due to them that we are here today, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on leading the all-party group and on calling this debate.

We must acknowledge that there are variations in the interpretation of the facts and history of this scandal. One of my constituents, Tony Farrugia, feels that evidence from his infected father's medical notes—namely, a letter—was removed from them. The letter was noted in the 1991 HIV litigation, but has been removed since. When my constituent received the notes, the letter was missing, and his attempts to retrieve it from the Department of Health have failed. The letter states that his father was given a bad batch of F8 in 1980, and that was reported on 7 June 1983. However, surprisingly, his father was not told until February 1985—nearly two years later.

I do not know the answers to those questions, and I do not believe that my constituent knows all the answers, but it seems to me from discussions with my constituents, and from the limited documentation I have seen, that there was a series of horrific mistakes, leading to a series of unimaginable consequences. That makes it really important that we get to the truth of what happened.

Efforts to deal with this issue to date—and we need to recognise that there have been a number—simply have not satisfied the people concerned, or many of them at least. The point is that many people affected by this tragedy—especially children and wider family members—have not been offered compensation. In any event, they do not feel that there will ever be closure until the full facts are known and they themselves are included in the process.

I do appreciate that the Government feel there has been proper disclosure of the information they have, but the fact remains that there is a clear disconnect between the various parties on this issue. As ever with such events, it is not just what happens between the various parties where one can see fault, but in the lack

of information afterwards. That not only can make the original situation worse, but is immensely frustrating for the victims' families.

As has been explained to me by my constituents Tony Farrugia and Chris Smith, who are members of the Fatherless Generation action group, this is a scandal of epic proportions, and I look forward to seeing continued progress on it.

4.27 pm

Diana Johnson: It is delightful to see you in your new place in the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on her maiden speech. That was an excellent start, and I am sure she will have a very long career in the House of Commons.

We have heard some really important and excellent contributions. I think we were all moved by the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) when she talked about Colin Smith—a little boy who received contaminated blood products when he was quite tiny, and who eventually died of AIDS and hepatitis C. That reminded us all that this is about boys and girls, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters who have been affected by this scandal.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that these blood products should have been withdrawn as soon as the risks involved in their use became clear?

Diana Johnson: That is a good point, and I hope the inquiry will be able to get to grips with it.

I am really pleased we have had this announcement today from the Government, but I gently say to the Minister that we will not be going away on this: parliamentarians on both sides of the House will be following carefully how the consultation takes place and who is consulted, and making sure that there is a good, timely timetable, that there is legal support for those who need help with representation, and that there are regular updates to Parliament.

I want to finish with a quote from a person who has just emailed me and says that this is “just the end of the beginning and still a long way to go before truth, justice and holding to account are achieved”.

We will now be watching very carefully what the Government do next.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the need for an independent public inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal.

Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill

Considered in Committee

[MR LINDSAY HOYLE in the Chair]

Clause 1

AIR TRAVEL ORGANISERS' LICENCES

4.31 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 2, in page 1, line 13, at end insert—

“(4) The Government must publish a review within one year of this Act receiving Royal Assent on the impact on UK consumers using EU-based companies affected by changes to consumer protection introduced by this section.”

This amendment requires the Government to review the impact of provisions under this section to ensure that they are not adversely affecting UK consumers using EU-based companies.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to consider clause 1 stand part.

Karl Turner: The amendment would require the Government to review the impact of clause 1 to ensure that it does not adversely affect UK consumers using EU-based companies. Essentially, the clause updates ATOL—the air travel organisers' licence—to ensure that it is harmonised with the 2015 EU package travel directive. The provision therefore extends ATOL to cover a wider range of holidays and protect more consumers. UK travel companies, we are told, will be able to sell more seamlessly across Europe, as they will need to comply with protections based not in the country of sale, but the country in which they are established. Those are the objectives that the Government seek to achieve. There is no difference of principle between the Government and the Opposition on this matter. Indeed, it is due to the package travel directive that it has been necessary to put such a provision into the Bill.

However, we seek clarification on some issues, which was why we tabled amendment 2. The amendment would provide a guarantee that the Government will review the impact of the ATOL revisions to ensure that they do not adversely affect UK consumers using EU-based companies. The whole idea of the clause is to improve the range of protections available. The broad substance of the changes to ATOL are necessary and are broadly welcome. As I said, they will harmonise UK law with the latest EU package travel directive, and that should have many benefits. A wider range of operators, including more dynamic package providers, are likely to be covered by the changes. That will hopefully bring protection to many more UK holidaymakers who are not covered under existing ATOL provisions.

For UK travel companies, standards will have to be in line with those of the country in which the company is established, rather than the place where the company sells the holiday. That should mean that companies established in the UK can sell far more seamlessly across Europe by simply adhering to the widely respected ATOL flag. However, the changes at the EU level could have adverse effects for UK consumers who purchase

their holiday or travel from EU-based travel companies, rather than British companies that sell into other European countries.

Amendment 2 would address that issue. The changes made through the directive will now mean that EU-based companies selling in the UK will have to adhere to ATOL-equivalent insolvency protections laid out in the member state where the business is based. In practice, that could lead to unintended consequences and, more significantly, costs for UK consumers. Processes and timescales for recompense may be distinctly different from what many travellers would expect under the current ATOL provisions, which are in many ways regarded as the gold standard.

The impact assessment warns:

“If consumers purchase a trip from a business established elsewhere in the EU and the company becomes insolvent there may be some costs to the consumer of processing a claim with a non-UK insolvency protector.”

Based on the latest Civil Aviation Authority figures, this will affect not just a relatively small number of holidaymakers. If this goes wrong, more than 500,000 passengers could be compromised, so a significant number of people could be adversely affected. It is therefore important that the Government take steps to anticipate and prepare for any possible negative impacts.

Amendment 2 would achieve that by requiring the UK Government to monitor the impact on UK consumers using EU-based companies. That would help to inform whether the UK Government should consider issuing further guidance, or co-operating with consumers and member states to ensure that protections are adequate.

The changes envisaged by the clause clearly make sense and are in line with what is required under the package travel directive. There is no doubt that when UK-established companies are selling into other countries, the consumers in those countries will have the benefit of the gold standard of ATOL protection. However, we are concerned about the protection given by EU-based companies selling in the UK. We hope that it will be equivalent to that under ATOL, but it will be subject to the rules and regulations of the EU country concerned. We are nervous about whether UK holidaymakers could lose out, so we are asking the Government to consider the issue and to monitor the situation properly.

As with so many other things, the environment is changing, particularly in relation to Brexit. ATOL will still be there post-Brexit, but we will explore possible changes when we discuss the next group of amendments. The package travel directive will no doubt still be there for those states that will still be members of the EU. What is uncertain at this stage is what the interface will be between the two things post-Brexit.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I have been following the hon. Gentleman's line of thought carefully. He seems to be seeking full protection for UK consumers buying in the EU. The EU package travel directive applies while we are still a member of the EU, but when we cease to be a member, the repeal Bill will have put its provisions in UK legislation, so surely the hon. Gentleman's argument is unnecessary.

Karl Turner: With respect, we do not know that yet, and nor do we know what the insolvency arrangements will be for companies abroad. The Government must address this real issue.

Stephen Hammond rose—

Karl Turner: I will not give way.

We ask the Government to get the ball rolling within a year of the Bill receiving Royal Assent, but a regular review is also needed, particularly in the light of Brexit. Our amendment is supported by the Association of British Travel Agents and other travel organisations. Despite ministerial assurances, we want our amendment to be made to the Bill, so we will press it to a Division.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I welcome the spirit in which the Opposition have gone about their business on these provisions. We have had measured and sensible exchanges, first when we started to explore the issues in the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill earlier this year, before the election, and subsequently in last week's Second Reading debate on this Bill. There is a determination across the House to get these matters right and a recognition that the protections that these measures offer travellers are important. Furthermore, as the Opposition spokesman made clear a moment or two ago, there is a recognition that we need to maintain the fitness for purpose of these arrangements to take account of changing circumstances in the travel market.

We must remember the context in which we are considering the amendment. The whole House shares the view that it is right for ATOL to continue and to respond to changing market conditions, and that the Government must do their part by ensuring that the necessary framework is in place. In respect of the amendment, I can go even further.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will happily give way, after I have made this telling and interesting point. I said to Labour Members not long ago that I understand that it is now de rigueur for parties from across the House to work together. That has become immensely fashionable recently; frankly, however, it has been my practice forever. I feel as though the world is catching up with me, and that is a great place to be.

Julian Knight: The Labour spokesman suggested earlier that there might be some rowing back of holidaymakers' rights after we leave the EU, but is that not quite wrong? The UK has led the charge in the EU for holidaymakers' rights. Will the Minister reassure the House yet again that we will protect holidaymakers' rights post Brexit?

Mr Hayes: Although I do not want my sermocination to be excessive, I will deal with those matters at greater length in my later remarks. My hon. Friend is right to say that Britain can be justly proud of our record in respect of ATOL. To be clear, the Labour party acknowledged that on Second Reading a few days ago. There is an acceptance across the House that Britain has done this well; that that is recognised in continental Europe; and that there is a desire to ensure that future arrangements are inspired by, and perhaps even emulate, the best practice exemplified by the United Kingdom.

I said that I could go further still in building a bridge across the House, and that is because I am sympathetic to the aims behind the amendment. It is crucial that we

carefully craft our policy, and the regulatory framework is the key to good governance. To govern is to be prepared to listen and learn, and it is absolutely right that we do so in respect of the changes that the Bill will make. It would not be fair to set any of this in stone, which is why I accept the need to consider these matters, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) set out, in the context of future changes to our relationship with Europe.

As I have said repeatedly, I am open-minded about reviewing the effects of these changes, but let me explain a little more. The Bill introduces the ability for ATOL to protect sales by businesses established in the UK and in other member states. It will be for protection schemes in other member states to provide the protections for UK consumers to which the amendment refers. That is not our responsibility—we do not have the power that the amendment suggests we should have—so I am not sure that the amendment works on a technical level.

The amendment does, however, highlight an important point, which it is right for us to consider. It seems to me that the hon. Gentleman's argument was twofold: first, that we need to understand the potential impact on UK consumers of purchasing from traders that are based overseas under different protection regimes; and, secondly, that we need to consider how Government should keep that element of protection under review. Let me deal with those points in turn.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: I will happily give way to my hon. Friend, who is a great authority on these matters, having led the process that resulted in the directive that was mentioned earlier.

4.45 pm

Vicky Ford: I do recall mentioning in the Chamber the last time we discussed the Bill that I chaired the negotiations on the package travel directive in my previous role.

My right hon. Friend refers to the technicalities of the amendment. Of course we should continue to review the impact of the changes on British consumers, because the Bill means that the ATOL guarantee will cover companies based in the UK, not companies selling into the UK, so it would not, for example, have caught the Low Cost Holidays situation last year.

On the technicalities of the impact assessment, if we read the underlying package travel directive, member states in Europe are not due to implement—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Vicky Ford rose—

The Chairman: Order. It is one thing to intervene, but another to make a speech. Please, if the hon. Lady needs to do that, she should do it over a couple of interventions. When I stand and say, "Order," she should please sit down. I do not want to stop a new Member;

I want to try and help you, but you have to help me as well. If you need to come back, I am sure the Minister will give way again.

Mr Hayes: I am extremely grateful, Mr Hoyle.

I will address my hon. Friend's remarks later in my brief speech. She is right, of course, that it is too early to know how the package travel directive will lead to changes in purchasing behaviour across borders. That was a point that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East made, too. We hope—

Karl Turner: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I think this might make the hon. Gentleman's point even better than it would be otherwise. I described earlier the desire of the Europeans essentially to—I hate to use this word, because it is so often a loaded term when it emanates from the EU, but I will—harmonise arrangements across Europe, but he is right to say, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), that we do not know.

Karl Turner: That is the precise reason we need a review.

Mr Hayes: Yes, which is why I have said that, in principle, I agree. I will come to how I am going to satisfy the hon. Gentleman by assuaging his fears. He has already declared his intent to divide the Committee, Mr Hoyle, but I might be able to persuade him not to. I might be able, in the generous remarks that I am about to make, to discourage him from that course of action. We shall wait to see. If I do not, I am not going to blame myself. Just so you know, Mr Hoyle, there will be no self-blame here; I will blame it on the hon. Gentleman. But let me do my best.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is not clear how this will work out. If other member states implement as they are required to, consumers will be able to purchase across Europe knowing that the protection offered will need to meet the improved standards in the new directive. In practice, that should see insolvency protection across the EU improved to levels, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, that are broadly in line with ATOL.

There is also an increased onus on member states to ensure that businesses in their own territory have effective protection in place, but if the Civil Aviation Authority or trading standards has doubts or concerns about traders based overseas, it will be able to contact designating bodies in other member states to check compliance. We will ensure—I say this directly to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East and to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald)—that compliance in other member states is a matter that the CAA monitors, and that it makes contact with its like in those member states to ensure that proper practice is being observed. But—

Vicky Ford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I will, before I move to the next exciting piece of my speech, because I want to go further to satisfy all Members of the House.

Vicky Ford: Given that other member states do not need to implement this measure until halfway through next year, would not an impact assessment within a year be too soon? Should we not be calling for a more constant and regular review of the impact on British holidaymakers, and a review once the system is established in 2021, say, like the European legislation?

Mr Hayes: In that punchy and pithy intervention, my hon. Friend made the point that I made when we debated these matters in the Committee considering the previous legislation of which this was originally a part. That is rather convoluted, but it makes the point. I said that the problem with an early review is that it would be too early and would not take account of the changing circumstances in exactly the way she suggests. But I am minded to go further. Given that we discussed the issue in Committee on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill, I want to make two further points.

First, the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015—I have a copy with me for the benefit of any hon. Member who may wish to look at the particular clauses—makes a review obligatory within five years of the passing of the legislation. That existing obligation would of course apply to ATOL. However, we can do better than that. I am proud of my Department's reputation for producing robust analysis to underpin and inform policy decisions, including providing full regulatory impact assessments to assess the effect of significant changes to regulation. That is a principle to which we have adhered in recent years throughout the ATOL reform process. We have already reformed ATOL once, in 2012, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East knows. We went through a consultation exercise, which I also have with me, and it is important that we continue the process of consulting and publishing the kind of impact assessments I have described before any regulatory changes take place.

It is really important that, when we changed the Civil Aviation Act 1982 in 2012 better to reflect current market practice, the call for evidence on the long-term review of the ATOL scheme produced responses that both informed the changes we made then—as they certainly did—and any further changes.

Julian Knight: My right hon. Friend has been most generous in taking interventions. He mentioned that ATOL was last reformed in 2012. Is not the truth that the process will not end with Brexit or with the Bill? It is an ongoing process of reform and renewal.

Mr Hayes: That is true and in a sense it is more catalysed by the changing character of communications and the way in which people organise and book their holidays than it is by our relationship with the continental countries of Europe. It is affected by both, but my hon. Friend is right to say that even if we were not leaving the European Union—and, my goodness, I am glad we are—we would still need to reflect on and consider changes that take account of the changing patterns of the way in which people organise and book their holidays. Indeed, he is right that the process of reflection, consultation, impact assessment and review needs to be a continual one.

Last year we consulted on the changes to the Civil Aviation Act 1982 that we are discussing today. We are about to launch a series of consultations on the detailed

[*Mr John Hayes*]

regulations that will follow, including on this particular issue. Each stage of the work will be the subject of impact assessments and consultations, so we will both consult and publish impact assessments on each stage of the changes that I have described and which will be drawn to the House's attention by various hon. Members—

Stephen Hammond rose—

Mr Hayes: I see another hon. Friend who wishes to do so.

Stephen Hammond: I always hesitate to stop the Minister in full flow because he is such a joy to hear. Surely his commitment is the key point, because the Government consulted in 2012 and have committed to consulting in bringing in this legislation and aligning ATOL with the European directive. That needs to continue, because we will not transpose it into law until next year.

Mr Hayes: That is also true, and it is certainly true that we cannot be premature about imagining, or speculating about, the outcome of that process; but I think we can offer some certainty about our determination to consult on the arrangements in respect of this particular set of regulations—partly, of course, because they exist irrespective of the European Union. ATOL's coincidental genesis with our entry to the European Union is just that, a coincidence. ATOL, I guess, would have existed regardless of our relationship with the European Union. Indeed, the regulatory and legislative framework that underpins it is domestic. So the domestic legislation that gave life to ATOL, and continues to do so, was very much at the behest of this Parliament, and of successive Governments—of all parties, by the way—who have continued to support that scheme.

Anna Soubry (Brentwood) (Con): This is a fascinating topic. Are we seeing an example of what happens when EU regulation is really rather good, and we accept that and transpose it into our law? Does my right hon. Friend not agree that there are many who supported our leaving the EU on the basis of some, I think, fanciful notion—I am sorry, Mr Hoyle, but I think this is an important point—that we would be stripping away all this sort of regulation and entirely doing our own thing? This proposal, however, seems to be rather a good idea.

Mr Hayes: In the darkest recesses of the darkest places there is occasionally a glimmer of light, and so it is with the European Union. One would not want to claim that every single aspect of every single thing that has been done over all the years of its existence has been malevolent. There is the odd measure which may be said to have shed just a glimmer of light, and in that sense, my right hon. Friend may be right.

Let me move on. During an evidence session earlier this year, Richard Moriarty of the Civil Aviation Authority told the Committee considering the Vehicle, Technology and Aviation Bill that he hoped the Government “will follow the practice that they have followed today: consult with us, consult the industry, do the impact assessment, and so on.” —[Official Report, *Vehicle Technology and Aviation Public Bill Committee*, 14 March 2017; c. 65, Q150.]

For the reasons that I have given, the current process is one from which I will not deviate. We will ensure that any changes that are made after the passing of the Bill, or as a consequence of it, will be subject to that rigorous and transparent process; but I want to go even further in satisfying the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East, because even that is not enough for me.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Air Travel Insolvency Protection Advisory Committee, or ATIPAC, as it is commonly known. Earlier, I described darkness and glimmers of light in respect of the European Union. So it is with Labour Governments. It is a great mistake in politics to demonise one's political opponents, because Governments of all colours do some things well and some things less well. All Governments introduce legislation that they subsequently regret, and omit to introduce legislation that they should. In grown-up politics and proper political debate—and this is a mature Parliament that is capable of such debate—we should freely acknowledge that.

In 2000, a Labour Government set up ATIPAC. Its purpose was to provide advice for the Civil Aviation Authority, the Air Travel Trust and the Secretary of State for Transport on policies that should be pursued to protect customers. It consists of representatives of industry, consumers, the CAA and Trading Standards, which means that it is well placed to provide an informed and independent review of policies. That committee already submits a substantial report to the Secretary of State each year. I have a copy of such a report, for the consideration and, I hope, education and enjoyment of any Member who may wish to cast an eye over it. The report includes drawing the Secretary of State's attention to any concerns on which ATIPAC's view is that further action is necessary to maintain strong consumer protection. This includes advice on changes in the market and, where appropriate, their potential impact on consumers and the financial protection arrangements.

5 pm

I am sure—absolutely confident—that the committee is already minded to keep a close eye on the impact of the directive on UK consumers. However, in the light of this amendment, the brief debate we have enjoyed and the responsible stance taken by those on the Opposition Benches—

Julian Knight: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: I am moving to my exciting peroration, but I will give way.

Julian Knight: Is my right hon. Friend saying that the industry experts—the people who really know—are saying in effect that this amendment is superfluous and is unnecessary?

Mr Hayes: I do not want to disagree with any hon. Member unnecessarily, and certainly not with a Member on my side of the Chamber. However, it is true—as my hon. Friend will know as he is a student of these matters who has taken a keen interest in this Bill from its inception—that ABTA has produced a briefing for this debate, and in a moment I will go through it in some detail. While it is true that ABTA welcomes, as the Opposition have, the changes that we are making to

ATOL, and there is a broad recommendation from it that we should be doing just that, it has given a detailed critique of the measures we are introducing and the amendments, and, at face value—that is something of an understatement—it seems rather sympathetic to the Opposition amendment. However, it will not have had the benefit of the further commitment I am about to give, which this Committee will be the first to know, for that is as it should be.

I am now going to catch the eye of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East. I am sure that that independent committee, which was set up by a Labour Government for the very purpose of reviewing these matters regularly to ensure they are fit for purpose and with the mission of observing and making recommendations in the interests of consumers will doubtless want to consider the impact of the changes we are making, and will of course be aware of the contextual changes in our relationship with the European Union and the effect of the directive on other countries and their arrangements. Nevertheless, I am prepared to write to the committee reflecting the sentiments the hon. Gentleman has articulated persuasively enough—I was going to say “so persuasively,” but I do not want to overstate the case—to encourage me to make this commitment, and to ask it not only in its annual report to review the implementation of these changes, but also to take account of the other remarks he has made.

Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that ATIPAC meets every year to review issues affecting consumer protection for British travellers buying not only from EU-based companies, but from anywhere they wish to travel in the world so, of course, British travellers will have this review every year?

Mr Hayes: On the pithiness index that you are clearly keeping, Mr Hoyle, that was not quite as pithy as my hon. Friend’s first intervention, but it is still pithy enough for me—and, I am sure, for you, Mr Hoyle, the ultimate arbiter of these things. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, of course: the committee, set up by a previous Labour Government, does indeed have exactly that purpose. It produces that annual report, which is a public document, but I have said that I would go further than that and request that that committee looks particularly at the very things this amendment seeks. So, not only are we going to have impact assessments and full and comprehensive consultations, not only have I committed to subjecting any further regulations to that kind of transparent and open debate with the appropriate scrutiny, and not only does the committee exist for the very purpose of producing an annual report in the interests of defending consumers in this field of work, but, further than that, I will write to the committee to tell it that it should do exactly as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East has asked.

Vicky Ford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I am frightened that my hon. Friend’s pithiness will decline over time, but I give way to her.

Vicky Ford: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, if we pass this Labour amendment, we will be asking for a review that is to take place anyway, and that the amendment is therefore unnecessary?

Mr Hayes: That is a perfect cue for what I was about to say. Knowing that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East is a reasonable and sensible man, and knowing that the shadow Secretary of State has some experience in this field, having debated these matters with me on more than one occasion, I cannot believe that a responsible Opposition would, in the light of the pledges I have made today, on the record, push these matters to a vote.

I will ask the committee—which is already there to do as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East has asked and is already producing the annual report that the amendment requests—to deliver the very assurance that he has requested. Those experts—for that is what they are—submit their report to the Secretary of State within four months of the end of each financial year. However, I am going to go even further. I am determined that the hon. Gentleman will be so captivated, encouraged and illuminated—not surprised; I would not go that far, because he knows what a good bloke I am—by the offers that I have made that he really will not want to push this matter to a vote. I am going to go further. The committee, which does indeed publish an annual report, can, as necessary, report more frequently if circumstances require. Should it believe that it needed to do so because of this legislative change, we would, ironically, have less scrutiny, fewer reports and less analysis if we were to pass the amendment than is the case now.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Hayes: There are those on my side of the House who take a less generous view than I do of the Labour party. However, I know that what I have just described is not the intention of Her Majesty’s Opposition. They do not want to have less scrutiny, less analysis, less certainty or less clarity. They want the same degree of clarity that I seek. I am prepared to acknowledge that. However, the effect of their amendment might be to leave us in a worse position than we are in at present, and that surely cannot be right.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I apologise for intervening so soon after arriving in the Chamber. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that most of these issues will be taken care of in the great repeal Bill anyway?

Mr Hayes: That is of course right; the committee will look at all those matters in that context. I said that earlier. I have also said, however, that I want to go further and to ensure that this stands proud as an example of analysis. Of course the great repeal Bill and our relationship with the European Union are bound to be the context in which the committee considers these matters; I guess that that is true. However, these ATOL arrangements predate our relationship with the European Union, or, if they came into force at the same time, it was a coincidence. Given that they are framed in domestic legislation rather than European legislation, I believe that ATOL would have existed regardless of our association with the European Union.

Stephen Hammond: Just for clarity, when I intervened on the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, he was making a point about insolvency, but the generous offer that my right hon. Friend just made would clearly cover insolvency as well.

Mr Hayes: Generosity needs to be reciprocal. It is not for me to say how the Opposition will conduct their affairs, but surely they will recognise that we are going as far as it is possible to go to ensure that the process is reviewed in precisely the way that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East described. He says that we cannot be absolutely certain how things will pan out in practice, and I agree. The spirit of his amendment seems to be the right one, so I have made it clear that I will facilitate just such an analysis of the impact of the changes. The point is that it is not as if the mechanisms do not exist for us to do that, and they do not merely rely on the legislative strength of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015, which says that there must be five-yearly reviews. Issues will go to the committee responsible for overseeing such matters, which was set up by a previous Labour Government, and we will insist that the impact is reviewed—more than once a year if necessary.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend for more clarity on that? Can the committee review things as often as it wants? I am sure that the committee will have been taking this debate seriously and that this particular part of it will be receiving attention. Can he confirm that he will be encouraging the committee to take its responsibility to review the proposal very seriously?

Mr Hayes: As you know, Mr Hoyle, it is not my habit to speak at length in this House. I like to abbreviate my remarks to a sufficient degree to make my point, but not to exaggerate the arguments. In the light of that intervention, however, I am inclined to go into rather more detail about the ATIPAC report, which is the document submitted to the Secretary of State in the way that I have described and then made public. The latest report states:

“The Committee’s role is to provide informed advice to the Government and the regulatory authorities on financial protection for consumers in the event of a holiday company’s insolvency. Its Constitution sets out the role and membership of the Committee, and can be reviewed in Appendix 4.”

I will not go into the details of appendix 4.

Hon. Members: Go on!

Mr Hayes: Well, okay. I am being persuaded to do so by popular demand and acclamation.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The Minister says “by popular demand”, but those Members were not here when he first started. He has had to wait until now.

Hon. Members: Start again!

Mr Hayes: I have drawn them to the Committee by the power of my oratory and my performance. They are like moths to a flame.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hayes: So, appendix 4, to which I referred—

Hon. Members: Give way!

Mr Hayes: Oh! I will happily give way to my hon. Friend.

Simon Hoare: May I say to my right hon. Friend, with the seriousness and candour that the moment demands, that he is a bright flame on a dull and grey afternoon to which the moths of Parliament are being drawn?

Mr Hayes: I do not know whether anyone else wants to—

The Chairman: Order. The danger is that someone might blow out that light. Come on, Minister.

Mr Hayes: I just wondered whether anyone else wanted to intervene in a similar vein.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con) rose—

Hon. Members: Hurrah!

Mr Hayes: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Mims Davies: I thank the Minister for giving way. It has been announced today that easyJet is to fly for the first time from Southampton airport, which is in my constituency. It is fantastic news, and I am heading off in about 10 minutes—*[Laughter.]* Like me, is the Minister wary of committing the Government to something that may adversely impact the industry during the Brexit process? I say that on what is a positive day for my constituency.

5.15 pm

Mr Hayes: There is no wish to do that on either side of the House. There is general agreement on both sides of the House that the measure must act in the interests of both consumers and businesses. It is certainly in the mutual interest of the travel industry and of those who use it that these protections are in place, which is precisely why Governments of all colours and persuasions have continued to invest in and support ATOL over the years, and it is why I said earlier, before a number of Members entered the Chamber, that there is general cross-party agreement among all contributors to these discussions that it is necessary to reform ATOL to take account of the changing way in which people book their holidays online and in other ways. People plan holidays rather differently from how they once did.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): My right hon. Friend and Lincolnshire neighbour, as a Transport Minister, has been diligent in attending to the concerns of my constituents about the infamous Bull Ring bottleneck in Horncastle, where the A153 and A158 cross. Has he paid the same diligence, care and attention to this Bill, such that he is able to reassure the Committee that the amendment is not to be passed and that we must keep the Bill as it is?

The Chairman: I have been quite generous to Members coming in late and intervening. If you are going to intervene, let us have short interventions.

Simon Hoare: It was short.

The Chairman: Mr Hoare, I assure you that I do not need any advice. I remind the Minister that there are others who wish to speak, including on his own Benches.

Mr Hayes: Then I will draw my remarks to a gradual conclusion. I have already brought my introductory remarks to their conclusion, and I am now moving to the main thrust of my response to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Far be it from me to prevent the Minister from continuing to drag things out. I apologise, but I do not have one of the intervention sheets that have been circulated. A few interventions ago, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) suggested that the great repeal Bill will account for this amendment. Can the Minister explain how the yet-to-be-published great repeal Bill will supersede or take account of it?

Mr Hayes: What I actually said is that the Air Travel Insolvency Protection Advisory Committee, which is missioned to consider these matters in the way I described, will doubtless take account of the contextual changes associated with our independence from the European Union, and I use the word “independence” advisedly. It is inconceivable that the committee would not make reference to that in its annual report, but I also said that I would write to draw the committee’s attention to the specificity of the measures we are bringing before the House to ensure that it carries out the very kind of report and review called for by the amendment.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I really must press on.

Appendix 4 of the annual report is categorical about the committee’s constitutional role, and it sets out the committee’s membership, which includes the Association of British Travel Agents, the Association of Independent Tour Operators, the Association of Airline Consolidators, the Board of Airline Representatives in the UK and the Travel Trust Association. The committee also includes up to 10 independent members, of whom one will be the chair. Of course, as I set out earlier, the committee’s independence and expertise mean that it is in a perfect place to do the very work that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East perfectly properly recommended to the House and that the amendment seeks to achieve.

Therefore, in the light of the fact that the Government have already obliged in law to review legislation within five years and have set up the independent panel of experts to report; that I have committed to seek guidance on the important issues the hon. Gentleman raises and to write to that committee asking it to review the legislation; and that the committee will report more often than annually as necessary, it would be extraordinary if the Labour party pushed this matter to the vote. It would be unreasonable for it to do so, but in the end that is a matter for it, not for me.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Last week, there was uncharacteristic consensus in welcoming the Second Reading of this Bill, as it is perfectly desirable and sensible to update the ATOL

scheme to ensure more protection for travellers when they go on holiday and to align it with the latest EU directive. However, there undoubtedly are a number of questions that will arise in relation to this scheme once the UK leaves the EU. We need cast-iron guarantees that the rights of and protections for travellers will not be diminished after Brexit.

On Second Reading, the Minister was clear in saying that he wished to protect passengers, but we lack the detail on that. We do not know when the UK will develop its own system of passenger rights and compensation in the aviation sector after Brexit, how similar it will be to current arrangements or how it will affect EU airlines and passengers. Scottish National party Members fully support the Government’s reviewing the impact of provisions under this amendment; surely it is right that they review the impact of the provisions to ensure that UK consumers are protected and are not disadvantaged by using EU-based companies. When we leave the EU, passenger rights must not be affected, and consumers and companies based in the UK and/or the EU need clarity on what their obligations are in respect of the ATOL scheme.

We have heard today that this will all be taken care of in the great repeal Bill, and I am sure we all hope it will. Last week, the Minister said he was keen to protect consumers, and I am optimistic that that will be in evidence today. His reasons for resisting reviewing the impact of provisions under this amendment do not seem clear. Periodic reviews still make sense; having a review within one year will inform the impact of the provisions and will still be helpful. The Minister is an eminent and sensible man, but I am at a loss here: if ATIPAC already carries out yearly reviews, why resist this? The reviews we are talking about merely write into legislation something that it appears is already happening. What has the Minister to lose? The committee provides advice, we are told, and this amendment writes into legislation—

Mr Hayes: This is very simple: if something is already happening—if it is already in law—one does not have to legislate for it again.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister is being a wee bit disingenuous here—

The Chairman: Order. That is not a word we would use, and I am sure the hon. Lady can think of something much more pleasant. The Minister is a nice man, after all, and I do not believe he would mislead the House.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister is an eminently sensible man, but the point is that I can only wonder why he is resisting yearly reviews which he has told us already happen. If they already happen, why not write them into this piece of legislation, if for no other reason than to reassure passengers as we face a post-Brexit world? I know he is an honourable man, and I urge him to reconsider and accept the amendment.

Karl Turner: The Minister is a terribly generous chap, but his attempts to pacify the Opposition with his promise of a letter to ATIPAC simply are not enough. That does not cut the mustard, so we will push the amendment to a vote.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 271, Noes 305.

Division No. 5]

[5.24 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Blackford, Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Douglas
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Crasby, Sir David
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese

Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Frith, James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jones, Darren

Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Gerard
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Ms Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke

Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Vicky Foxcroft and
 Nic Dakin

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dockerill, Julia
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie

Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapley, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel

Hughes, Eddie

Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Maithouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil

Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubray, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Symes, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh

Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John

Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim
Tellers for the Noes:
 Stuart Andrew and
 Andrew Griffiths

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2

AIR TRAVEL TRUST

Patricia Gibson: I beg to move amendment 1, page 2, line 10, at end insert—

‘(8) Regulations under subsection (6) may not be laid before Parliament until the Secretary of State has published an assessment of their impact and has launched a consultation on the proposed amendments to the definition of “Air Travel Trust.”’

This amendment requires the Secretary of State to undertake an impact assessment and launch a consultation before bringing forward any regulations to amend the definition of Air Travel Trust under this Act.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 3, page 2, line 10, at end insert—

‘(8) Before laying regulations under subsection (6), the Secretary of State must publish a full impact assessment and consult on the proposals.’

This amendment would require the Government to undertake a full impact assessment and consultation before bringing forward regulations to create any new air travel trusts through an affirmative resolution.

Clause stand part.

Patricia Gibson: Amendment 1, which stands in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), would require the Government to undertake a full impact assessment and consultation before introducing any regulations to amend the definition of air travel trust under the Bill. Clause 2 requires that—*[Interruption.]*

The Chairman: Order. There is a lot of conversation. I really am struggling to hear, and I am not sure whether the mic is picking up this speech. Would hon. Members please have their conversations when they have left the Chamber?

Patricia Gibson: Clause 2 requires only that the Secretary of State has an affirmative resolution from each House of Parliament, but that is not enough. The Government should be required to conduct a proper consultation and assess the potential impact of any proposed changes to the ATOL scheme and air travel trust that they intend to introduce through secondary legislation. Any proposals must be fully transparent, and consumers and businesses alike must be formally consulted in the

process to allow for proper scrutiny. We trust that the Minister will accept that and our reasons for tabling the amendment.

Mr John Hayes: I can satisfy the hon. Lady entirely. I fully intend to ensure exactly what she asked for: full consultation and a comprehensive impact assessment in respect of any regulations to be made under these measures. On that basis, I hope she will withdraw the amendment. If she does not, she will look rather daft.

Karl Turner: We will press amendment 3 to a Division. We seek a commitment that the Minister gave in the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill Committee—that the Government would conduct a thorough impact assessment and consultation before implementing the power. Clause 2 relates to the Air Travel Trust, which is the legal vehicle that holds the money that is then used to refund consumers under ATOL protections. It gives the Secretary of State the power to define separate trust arrangements to reflect different market models, prefiguring some of the changes in the package holiday market mentioned by the Minister.

Amendment 3 would require the Government to undertake a full and proper review, and public consultation, before introducing any of the changes that would be enabled under the powers in clause 2. Unlike clause 1, clause 2 does not seem directly relevant to harmonising EU and UK regulations. Instead, it is a dormant power that the Government will retain in order to make considerable changes to ATOL, and particularly to the Air Travel Trust. That is where Brexit comes in because, were such changes to happen, they would most likely be in the event of the UK leaving the European Union.

During one of the VTAB Committee evidence sessions, Richard Moriarty of the Civil Aviation Authority—a trustee of the current Air Travel Trust—said that he recognised the possible merits of separating the trust to reflect the variations of products in the market. However, he explained that we simply are not there yet, and that it would be wrong for the Government to use the Bill as a means of making wholesale changes without due consultation. The Minister made it clear in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) that changes would be made only through the affirmative procedure, yet the Bill does not account for any further consultation as part of this measure.

The Government’s impact assessment explicitly states that it

“does not consider proposals for ATOL reform, beyond what is required”

in the package travel directive. It would therefore be rather inappropriate for the Minister to go beyond that, without providing assurances that proper consultation and scrutiny will take place if the Government are minded to go beyond changes that were already envisaged.

During the VTAB evidence session, Mr Moriarty said that he hoped the Government would

“follow the practice that they have followed today: consult with us, consult the industry, do the impact assessment, and so on.”

Amendment 3 simply says that. It is fair and reasonable and would guarantee scrutiny of further changes that may come down the track regarding ATOL protection.

Patricia Gibson: In the light of the Minister's assurances to the House, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment proposed: 3, page 2, line 10, at end insert

“(8) Before laying regulations under subsection (6), the Secretary of State must publish a full impact assessment and consult on the proposals.”—(Karl Turner.)

This amendment would require the Government to undertake a full impact assessment and consultation before bringing forward regulations to create any new air travel trusts through an affirmative resolution.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 274, Noes 307.

Division No. 6

[5.44 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Cryer, John
Abrahams, Debbie	Cummins, Judith
Alexander, Heidi	Cunningham, Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Amesbury, Mike	Dakin, Nic
Antoniuzzi, Tonia	Davey, rh Sir Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan	David, Wayne
Austin, Ian	Davies, Geraint
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Day, Martyn
Bardell, Hannah	De Cordova, Marsha
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	De Piero, Gloria
Beckett, rh Margaret	Debonnaire, Thangam
Benn, rh Hilary	Dent Coad, Emma
Blackford, Ian	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet
Blackman, Kirsty	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Dodds, Anneliese
Blomfield, Paul	Doughty, Stephen
Brabin, Tracy	Dowd, Peter
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Drew, Dr David
Brake, rh Tom	Dromey, Jack
Brennan, Kevin	Duffield, Rosie
Brock, Deidre	Eagle, Ms Angela
Brown, Alan	Eagle, Maria
Brown, Lyn	Edwards, Jonathan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Efford, Clive
Bryant, Chris	Elliott, Julie
Buck, Ms Karen	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Burgon, Richard	Elmore, Chris
Byrne, rh Liam	Esterson, Bill
Cable, rh Sir Vince	Evans, Chris
Cadbury, Ruth	Farrelly, Paul
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Farron, Tim
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Field, rh Frank
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Carden, Dan	Fletcher, Colleen
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Flint, rh Caroline
Champion, Sarah	Flynn, Paul
Chapman, Douglas	Fovargue, Yvonne
Chapman, Jenny	Frith, James
Charalambous, Bambos	Furniss, Gill
Cherry, Joanna	Gaffney, Hugh
Coaker, Vernon	Gapes, Mike
Coffey, Ann	Gardiner, Barry
Cooper, Julie	George, Ruth
Cooper, Rosie	Gibson, Patricia
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Gill, Preet
Cowan, Ronnie	Glindon, Mary
Coyle, Neil	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Crausby, Sir David	Goodman, Helen
Creagh, Mary	Grady, Patrick
Creasy, Stella	Grant, Peter
Cruddas, Jon	Gray, Neil

Green, Kate	McDonnell, rh John
Greenwood, Lilian	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Greenwood, Margaret	McGinn, Conor
Griffith, Nia	McGovern, Alison
Grogan, John	McInnes, Liz
Gwynne, Andrew	McKinnell, Catherine
Haigh, Louise	McMahon, Jim
Hamilton, Fabian	McMorrin, Anna
Hanson, rh David	Mearns, Ian
Hardy, Emma	Monaghan, Carol
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Harris, Carolyn	Moran, Layla
Hayes, Helen	Morden, Jessica
Hayman, Sue	Morris, Grahame
Healey, rh John	Murray, Ian
Hendrick, Mr Mark	Nandy, Lisa
Hendry, Drew	Newlands, Gavin
Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Norris, Alex
Hermon, Lady	O'Hara, Brendan
Hill, Mike	Onasanya, Fiona
Hillier, Meg	Onn, Melanie
Hobhouse, Wera	Onwurah, Chi
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Osamor, Kate
Hollern, Kate	Owen, Albert
Hopkins, Kelvin	Peacock, Stephanie
Huq, Dr Rupa	Pennycook, Matthew
Hussain, Imran	Perkins, Toby
Jardine, Christine	Phillips, Jess
Jarvis, Dan	Phillipson, Bridget
Jones, Darren	Pidcock, Laura
Jones, Gerald	Platt, Jo
Jones, Helen	Pollard, Luke
Jones, Mr Kevan	Pound, Stephen
Jones, Sarah	Powell, Lucy
Jones, Susan Elan	Rashid, Faisal
Kane, Mike	Rayner, Angela
Kendall, Liz	Reed, Mr Steve
Khan, Afzal	Rees, Christina
Killen, Gerard	Reeves, Ellie
Kinnock, Stephen	Reeves, Rachel
Kyle, Peter	Reynolds, Jonathan
Laird, Lesley	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Lake, Ben	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Lamb, rh Norman	Rodda, Matt
Lammy, rh Mr David	Rowley, Danielle
Lavery, Ian	Ruane, Chris
Law, Chris	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Lee, Ms Karen	Ryan, rh Joan
Leslie, Mr Chris	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Lewis, Clive	Sheppard, Tommy
Lewis, Mr Ivan	Sheriff, Paula
Linden, David	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Lloyd, Stephen	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Lloyd, Tony	Slaughter, Andy
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Smeeth, Ruth
Lucas, Ian C.	Smith, Angela
Lynch, Holly	Smith, Cat
Madders, Justin	Smith, Eleanor
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Smith, Laura
Mahmood, Shabana	Smith, Nick
Malhotra, Seema	Smith, Owen
Marsden, Gordon	Smyth, Karin
Martin, Sandy	Snell, Gareth
Maskell, Rachael	Sobel, Alex
Mc Nally, John	Spellar, rh John
McCabe, Steve	Starmer, rh Keir
McCarthy, Kerry	Stephens, Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain	Stevens, Jo
McDonald, Andy	Stone, Jamie
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm	Streeting, Wes
McDonald, Stuart C.	Stringer, Graham

Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Western, Matt

Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert

Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dockerill, Julia
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicki
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard

Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapley, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David

Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok

Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 Andrew Griffiths and
 Stuart Andrew

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 and 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF LEAVING THE EU ON CONSUMER PROTECTION UNDER THE ATOL SCHEME

(1) The Secretary of State must carry out an assessment of the potential impact of the UK's exit from the European Union on consumer protection under the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing scheme and the Air Travel Trust.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay a report of the assessment before Parliament within 12 months of the passing of this Act, and once in each calendar year thereafter.—(Patricia Gibson.)

This new clause would require the Government to report regularly on the effect of Brexit on consumer protection under the ATOL scheme and to report annually on the progress that is made.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Patricia Gibson: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The new clause stands in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). It would require the UK Government to report regularly on the effect of Brexit on consumer protection under the ATOL scheme and to report annually on the progress they have made.

Brexit throws up great uncertainties, not least in the aviation sector with regard to passenger rights, compensation schemes and how much change and/or stability can be expected. There is also the question of how EU airlines and passengers may be affected. The overriding concern about the Bill, welcome as it is, is that consumer protections must be safeguarded and, furthermore, that such protections must continue to be enhanced and updated as society and technology evolve,

just as has happened during our EU membership. The UK cannot be left behind, stagnating in a post-Brexit world.

New clause 1 is an extremely important move to provide some comfort and confidence to consumers; a lack of guarantees will otherwise leave passengers vulnerable and might put people off booking holidays. That could only be bad news for our outbound tourism economy, which is so vital for jobs in Scotland and the rest of the UK. We intend to press the new clause to a Division.

6 pm

Mr John Hayes: As I did with the amendments, I start by saying that I fully endorse, and indeed support, the purpose of the new clause. By the way, I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for withdrawing her earlier amendment following the assurances that I gave her. I say to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) that I am fully committed to full consultation and a full impact assessment on the regulations as they are rolled out as a result of the Bill.

The point is that the ATOL legislation is not dependent on the package travel directive. The Bill will harmonise ATOL with the package travel directive in the immediate term. As I made clear earlier, ATOL legislation and protection will remain in place as we leave the European Union. They are made by, framed in and supported by domestic legislation.

Although I understand the point that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran makes, I have to tell her that the new clause is unnecessary, because ATOL is enshrined in an Act of this Parliament, and only this Parliament can change that. Mindful of that; mindful of the assurances that I have given about consultation, further review and impact assessments, which I repeat; mindful of the fact that, as I have mentioned, there will be a review of all these matters; and given what I have said about ATIPAC, I hope that she might withdraw the new clause.

Karl Turner: New clause 1 seems eminently sensible. These consumer protection measures require an assessment, so we will support the new clause.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 273, Noes 308.

Division No. 7

[6.1 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Abrahams, Debbie	Brake, rh Tom
Alexander, Heidi	Brennan, Kevin
Ali, Rushanara	Brock, Deidre
Amesbury, Mike	Brown, Alan
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Brown, Lyn
Ashworth, Jonathan	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Austin, Ian	Bryant, Chris
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Buck, Ms Karen
Bardell, Hannah	Burgon, Richard
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Byrne, rh Liam
Beckett, rh Margaret	Cable, rh Sir Vince
Benn, rh Hilary	Cadbury, Ruth
Blackford, Ian	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Blomfield, Paul	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Brabin, Tracy	Carden, Dan

Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Greenwood, Margaret	McGovern, Alison	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Champion, Sarah	Griffith, Nia	McInnes, Liz	Slaughter, Andy
Chapman, Douglas	Grogan, John	McKinnell, Catherine	Smeeth, Ruth
Chapman, Jenny	Gwynne, Andrew	McMahon, Jim	Smith, Angela
Charalambous, Bambos	Haigh, Louise	McMorrin, Anna	Smith, Cat
Cherry, Joanna	Hamilton, Fabian	Mearns, Ian	Smith, Eleanor
Clwyd, rh Ann	Hanson, rh David	Monaghan, Carol	Smith, Jeff
Coaker, Vernon	Hardy, Emma	Moon, Mrs Madeleine	Smith, Laura
Coffey, Ann	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Moran, Layla	Smith, Nick
Cooper, Rosie	Harris, Carolyn	Morden, Jessica	Smith, Owen
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hayes, Helen	Morris, Grahame	Smyth, Karin
Cowan, Ronnie	Hayman, Sue	Murray, Ian	Snell, Gareth
Coyle, Neil	Healey, rh John	Nandy, Lisa	Sobel, Alex
Crausby, Sir David	Hendrick, Mr Mark	Newlands, Gavin	Starmer, rh Keir
Creagh, Mary	Hendry, Drew	Norris, Alex	Stephens, Chris
Creasy, Stella	Hepburn, Mr Stephen	O'Hara, Brendan	Stevens, Jo
Cruddas, Jon	Hermon, Lady	Onasanya, Fiona	Stone, Jamie
Cryer, John	Hill, Mike	Onn, Melanie	Streeting, Wes
Cummins, Judith	Hillier, Meg	Onwurah, Chi	Stringer, Graham
Cunningham, Alex	Hobhouse, Wera	Osamor, Kate	Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Owen, Albert	Swinson, Jo
Dakin, Nic	Hollern, Kate	Peacock, Stephanie	Tami, Mark
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Hopkins, Kelvin	Pennycook, Matthew	Thewliss, Alison
David, Wayne	Hosie, Stewart	Perkins, Toby	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Davies, Geraint	Huq, Dr Rupa	Phillips, Jess	Thornberry, rh Emily
Day, Martyn	Hussain, Imran	Phillipson, Bridget	Timms, rh Stephen
De Cordova, Marsha	Jardine, Christine	Pidcock, Laura	Turner, Karl
De Piero, Gloria	Jarvis, Dan	Platt, Jo	Twigg, Derek
Debonnaire, Thangam	Jones, Darren	Pollard, Luke	Twigg, Stephen
Dent Coad, Emma	Jones, Gerald	Pound, Stephen	Twist, Liz
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet	Jones, Helen	Powell, Lucy	Vaz, rh Keith
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Jones, Mr Kevan	Rashid, Faisal	Vaz, Valerie
Dodds, Anneliese	Jones, Sarah	Rayner, Angela	Walker, Thelma
Doughty, Stephen	Jones, Susan Elan	Reed, Mr Steve	Western, Matt
Dowd, Peter	Kane, Mike	Rees, Christina	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Drew, Dr David	Kendall, Liz	Reeves, Ellie	Whitfield, Martin
Dromey, Jack	Khan, Afzal	Reeves, Rachel	Whitford, Dr Philippa
Duffield, Rosie	Killen, Gerard	Reynolds, Jonathan	Williams, Hywel
Eagle, Ms Angela	Kinnock, Stephen	Rimmer, Ms Marie	Williams, Dr Paul
Eagle, Maria	Kyle, Peter	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey	Williamson, Chris
Edwards, Jonathan	Laird, Lesley	Rodda, Matt	Wilson, Phil
Efford, Clive	Lake, Ben	Rowley, Danielle	Wishart, Pete
Elliott, Julie	Lamb, rh Norman	Ruane, Chris	Woodcock, John
Ellman, Mrs Louise	Lammy, rh Mr David	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd	Yasin, Mohammad
Elmore, Chris	Lavery, Ian	Ryan, rh Joan	Zeichner, Daniel
Esterson, Bill	Law, Chris	Sharma, Mr Virendra	
Evans, Chris	Lee, Ms Karen	Sheerman, Mr Barry	Tellers for the Ayes:
Farrelly, Paul	Leslie, Mr Chris	Sheppard, Tommy	Kirsty Blackman and
Farron, Tim	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Sherriff, Paula	David Linden
Field, rh Frank	Lewis, Clive	Shuker, Mr Gavin	
Fitzpatrick, Jim	Lewis, Mr Ivan		
Fletcher, Colleen	Lloyd, Tony		
Flint, rh Caroline	Long Bailey, Rebecca		
Flynn, Paul	Lucas, Ian C.	Adams, Nigel	Berry, Jake
Fovargue, Yvonne	Lynch, Holly	Afolami, Bim	Blackman, Bob
Foxcroft, Vicky	Madders, Justin	Afriyie, Adam	Blunt, Crispin
Frith, James	Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Aldous, Peter	Bone, Mr Peter
Furniss, Gill	Mahmood, Shabana	Allan, Lucy	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Gaffney, Hugh	Malhotra, Seema	Allen, Heidi	Bowie, Andrew
Gapes, Mike	Marsden, Gordon	Amess, Sir David	Bradley, Ben
Gardiner, Barry	Martin, Sandy	Argar, Edward	Bradley, rh Karen
George, Ruth	Maskell, Rachael	Atkins, Victoria	Brady, Mr Graham
Gibson, Patricia	Mc Nally, John	Bacon, Mr Richard	Brereton, Jack
Gill, Preet	McCabe, Steve	Badenoch, Mrs Kemi	Bridgen, Andrew
Glindon, Mary	McCarthy, Kerry	Baker, Mr Steve	Brine, Steve
Godsiff, Mr Roger	McDonagh, Siobhain	Baldwin, Harriett	Brokenshire, rh James
Goodman, Helen	McDonald, Andy	Barclay, Stephen	Bruce, Fiona
Grady, Patrick	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm	Baron, Mr John	Buckland, Robert
Grant, Peter	McDonald, Stuart C.	Bebb, Guto	Burghart, Alex
Gray, Neil	McDonnell, rh John	Bellingham, Sir Henry	Burns, Conor
Green, Kate	McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Benyon, rh Richard	Burt, rh Alistair
Greenwood, Lilian	McGinn, Conor	Beresford, Sir Paul	Cairns, rh Alun

Cartlidge, James	Gray, James	Mackinlay, Craig	Sandbach, Antoinette
Cash, Sir William	Grayling, rh Chris	Maclean, Rachel	Scully, Paul
Caulfield, Maria	Green, Chris	Main, Mrs Anne	Seely, Mr Bob
Chalk, Alex	Green, rh Damian	Mak, Alan	Selous, Andrew
Chishti, Rehman	Greening, rh Justine	Malthouse, Kit	Shapps, rh Grant
Chope, Mr Christopher	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Mann, Scott	Sharma, Alok
Churchill, Jo	Gymah, Mr Sam	Masterton, Paul	Shelbrooke, Alec
Clark, Colin	Hair, Kirstene	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Clark, rh Greg	Halfon, rh Robert	Maynard, Paul	Skidmore, Chris
Clarke, Mr Simon	Hall, Luke	McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick	Smith, Chloe
Cleverly, James	Hammond, rh Mr Philip	McPartland, Stephen	Smith, Henry
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Hammond, Stephen	McVey, rh Ms Esther	Smith, Julian
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Hancock, rh Matt	Menzies, Mark	Smith, Royston
Collins, Damian	Hands, rh Greg	Mercer, Johnny	Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Costa, Alberto	Harper, rh Mr Mark	Merriman, Huw	Soubry, rh Anna
Courts, Robert	Harrington, Richard	Metcalfe, Stephen	Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Cox, Mr Geoffrey	Harris, Rebecca	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Spencer, Mark
Crabb, rh Stephen	Harrison, Trudy	Milling, Amanda	Stephenson, Andrew
Crouch, Tracey	Hart, Simon	Mills, Nigel	Stevenson, John
Davies, Chris	Hayes, rh Mr John	Milton, rh Anne	Stewart, Bob
Davies, David T. C.	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Stewart, Iain
Davies, Glyn	Heappey, James	Moore, Damien	Streeter, Mr Gary
Davies, Mims	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Mordaunt, Penny	Stride, rh Mel
Davies, Philip	Heaton-Jones, Peter	Morgan, rh Nicky	Stuart, Graham
Davis, rh Mr David	Henderson, Gordon	Morris, David	Sturdy, Julian
Dinenage, Caroline	Herbert, rh Nick	Morris, James	Sunak, Rishi
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hinds, Damian	Morton, Wendy	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Docherty, Leo	Hoare, Simon	Mundell, rh David	Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Dockerill, Julia	Hollingbery, George	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Syms, Mr Robert
Donelan, Michelle	Hollinrake, Kevin	Murrison, Dr Andrew	Thomas, Derek
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Neill, Robert	Thomson, Ross
Double, Steve	Holloway, Adam	Newton, Sarah	Throup, Maggie
Dowden, Oliver	Howell, John	Nokes, Caroline	Tolhurst, Kelly
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Huddleston, Nigel	Norman, Jesse	Tomlinson, Justin
Drax, Richard	Hughes, Eddie	O'Brien, Neil	Tomlinson, Michael
Duddridge, James	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Offord, Dr Matthew	Tracey, Craig
Duguid, David	Hurd, Mr Nick	Opperman, Guy	Tredinnick, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan	Jack, Mr Alister	Parish, Neil	Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	James, Margot	Patel, rh Priti	Truss, rh Elizabeth
Dunne, Mr Philip	Javid, rh Sajid	Paterson, rh Mr Owen	Tugendhat, Tom
Ellis, Michael	Jayawardena, Mr Rani	Pawsey, Mark	Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Penning, rh Mike	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Elphicke, Charlie	Jenrick, Robert	Penrose, John	Vickers, Martin
Eustice, George	Johnson, rh Boris	Percy, Andrew	Villiers, rh Theresa
Evans, Mr Nigel	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Perry, Claire	Walker, Mr Charles
Evennett, rh David	Johnson, Gareth	Philp, Chris	Walker, Mr Robin
Fabricant, Michael	Johnson, Joseph	Pincher, Christopher	Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Fallon, rh Sir Michael	Jones, Andrew	Poulter, Dr Dan	Warman, Matt
Fernandes, Suella	Jones, rh Mr David	Pow, Rebecca	Watling, Giles
Field, rh Mark	Jones, Mr Marcus	Prentis, Victoria	Whately, Helen
Ford, Vicky	Kawczynski, Daniel	Prisk, Mr Mark	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Foster, Kevin	Keegan, Gillian	Pritchard, Mark	Whittaker, Craig
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Kennedy, Seema	Pursglove, Tom	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Kerr, Stephen	Quin, Jeremy	Wiggin, Bill
Frazer, Lucy	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Quince, Will	Williamson, rh Gavin
Freeman, George	Knight, Julian	Raab, Dominic	Wilson, Sammy
Freer, Mike	Kwarteng, Kwasi	Redwood, rh John	Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Lamont, John	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob	Wood, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger	Lancaster, Mark	Robertson, Mr Laurence	Wragg, Mr William
Garnier, Mark	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Robinson, Mary	Wright, rh Jeremy
Gauke, rh Mr David	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Rosindell, Andrew	Zahawi, Nadhim
Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Lee, Dr Phillip	Ross, Douglas	
Gibb, rh Nick	Lefroy, Jeremy	Rowley, Lee	
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl	Leigh, Sir Edward	Rudd, rh Amber	
Glen, John	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver	Rutley, David	
Goldsmith, Zac	Lewer, Andrew		
Goodwill, Mr Robert	Lewis, rh Brandon		
Gove, rh Michael	Lewis, rh Dr Julian		
Graham, Luke	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian		
Graham, Richard	Lidington, rh Mr David		
Grant, Bill	Lord, Mr Jonathan		
Grant, Mrs Helen	Loughton, Tim		

Tellers for the Noes:
Andrew Griffiths and
Stuart Andrew

Question accordingly negatived.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

6.15 pm

Mr John Hayes: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

What a pleasure it is to move the motion for the Third Reading of this important Bill, and to do so in the knowledge that it will be considered in the spirit that it deserves. We have had a properly reasoned, measured and sensible debate about its provisions, and I am grateful to Members on both sides of the House for contributing to that process. I did think it a little unnecessary for us to vote once or twice earlier, but let us put that to one side, because I fully appreciate that the Opposition must do their job, if only to maintain the declining morale of a parliamentary party that knows it is no nearer to power now than it was a week, a month or a year ago. *[Interruption.]* But let us put that to one side.

This is an important piece of legislation, which, as we have said repeatedly, brings up to date and up to speed the arrangements under the ATOL scheme which protect travellers. Those arrangements have been proved to be effective time and again. They are necessary and desirable, as has been acknowledged throughout our considerations. Benjamin Disraeli, of whom we have heard too little this afternoon, said:

“Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen.”

What I will remember of today's considerations is that, as I have said, they have been conducted in the way in which Parliament should consider all such matters.

I am entirely confident that the Bill, as it proceeds, will continue to provide the necessary reassurance for travellers and the necessary measures for businesses, and that, in those terms, it will do the Government and the House proud. It is right for Governments to act in the interests of the common good, for that is enshrined in all that we are in my party, and I hope that other parties in the House will gradually, over time, learn from that. I entirely welcome the way in which we have dealt with these matters, and I look forward to further consideration of them once the Bill becomes law. As I said again today, I am committed to reviewing the position thoroughly, and when the regulations come before the House—I repeat this, because I think it important to emphasise and amplify it—we will review the implications in the way recommended by the House.

We can be proud of the Bill. I am sure that it is not just fit for purpose, but necessary, desirable and efficacious.

6.17 pm

Karl Turner: The Labour party supports the Bill, and we will vote in support of it. There are, however, some concerns about the impact of some parts of it, which we expressed when the clauses were first debated as part of the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill and again throughout the passage of this Bill. We hope that the Minister has taken on board the points raised by Labour and echoed by the Scottish National party, who re-tabled Labour's amendments to VTAB in Committee. As the House will know, the Prime Minister has asked the Opposition to help the Government by providing some policy suggestions. However, it seems that SNP Members are not even asking for help, but are simply taking Labour's policy ideas as their own. We should probably take that as a compliment.

We support the Bill because it brings ATOL up to date and will ensure that it is harmonised with the latest European Union package travel directive, extending to a wider range of holidays and protecting more consumers, as well as allowing United Kingdom travel companies to sell more seamlessly across Europe. While we harbour some real concerns over whether UK consumers will be sufficiently protected by EU-based companies, as they will no longer be subject to ATOL but to member state equivalents, we welcome changes that will ultimately help to protect more holidaymakers.

The implications for ATOL after Brexit are also a cause for concern. Hidden in the Bill are proposals that the Secretary of State should require only an affirmative resolution to significantly reform ATOL and the air travel trust fund. Labour recognises the merits of some reforms, but we believe that an impact assessment, full consultation and full scrutiny should have been required before any fundamental changes are made to these consumer protections.

These issues bring to the forefront uncertainties over the future of UK aviation following the decision to leave the EU. The Labour party has been clear that, whichever framework is chosen by the Government, we should prioritise retaining an essentially unchanged operating environment. They should prioritise air service agreements as part of exit negotiations. As is customary, such agreements should be negotiated separately from, and prior to, the UK's negotiations on trade with the EU. The Government must not waste the opportunity this Bill presents to clarify their intended future arrangements for our aviation industry.

The UK aviation sector is the largest in Europe and the third largest in the world, supporting 1 million jobs and bringing £9 billion into the Treasury in tax receipts. Over a quarter of a billion passengers were transported in 2015. But aviation also provides a network infrastructure that enables other industries to do well. Half a million jobs in the UK tourism industry are supported by aviation, and 40% of UK imports and exports by value go via UK airports. The EU is the UK's single biggest destination, accounting for 49% of passengers and 54% of scheduled commercial flights. Airlines that operate from within the UK are able to rely on the EU single aviation market, which allows any airline owned and controlled by EU nationals to operate freely in the EU without restrictions on capacity, frequency or pricing.

Additionally, EU carriers are able to take advantage of the traffic rights contained in the many air services agreements that the EU has negotiated on behalf of all member states with non-EU countries. Significantly, this includes the EU-US open skies agreement which enables airlines from the EU and the US to fly between the EU and the US. If Britain leaves the EU without retaining any form of European common aviation area membership, airlines will need to negotiate new rights to operate freely within the EU and operate transatlantic routes. This means that there will be no legal framework that allows airlines to fly to those destinations from the UK. So UK airlines would also lose the right to operate within the remaining EU27, and EU airlines might lose the right to fly UK domestic routes as well.

Aviation is legally unique: it is separate from trade agreements and does not form part of the World Trade Organisation system. Instead, countries negotiate bilateral or multilateral air services agreements to provide airlines

with the legal rights to fly to certain places. To ensure the continuity of connectivity, the UK will need to negotiate a new air services agreement with the EU and countries such as the US. If there is no such agreement by the time the UK leaves the EU, the UK's connectivity will be undermined and its ability to trade will be more difficult. So it is imperative that the Government prioritise retaining an essentially unchanged operating environment. That is why they should prioritise air services agreements as part of Brexit negotiations.

While the measures in this Bill are important and will provide additional security to UK holidaymakers, it is strange that the Government thought it necessary to debate the Bill in a Committee of the whole House. The measures in the Bill were included in VTAB, which had passed through its Committee stages before the Prime Minister decided to call the unnecessary snap general election. I think I am right in saying that these provisions in that Bill were debated in no more than 45 minutes in Committee. The Government have not made changes to their proposals and the Opposition supported them as part of VTAB in the last Parliament, so we simply do not understand why the decision was taken for this small, agreeable and largely non-contentious niche Bill to take up time in the Chamber, other than to try to disguise the fact that this chaotic Government have a threadbare legislative programme for this Parliament.

Mr John Hayes: As a result of that scrutiny—which the hon. Gentleman should not disparage because he has played an important part in making it real—we have had a good debate on the issues of review, of impact assessments and of further consultation. He will have heard what I have said about all those things, which are matters close to his heart, so actually the debate has served a really useful purpose.

Karl Turner: The Minister makes a fair enough point, but with respect, it has been a terrible waste of time debating this matter in the Committee of the whole House when it was previously dealt with in 45 minutes in Committee upstairs. For the sake of appearances, VTAB has been broken up into its component parts and is now being given undue time for debate in this Chamber.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): It is never a waste of time to discuss anything pertaining to the whole of the UK in this House or in a Committee of the whole House. This gives me the opportunity to remind the Minister that we have three airports in Northern Ireland. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that is physically connected to another EU member state—the Republic of Ireland—and it is really important, as has been stated in the debate, that we do not lose air traffic and business from Northern Ireland to airports such as Dublin.

Karl Turner: The hon. Lady makes her point on behalf of her constituents, and she makes it well, but I do not think that it requires a response from me.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): This is a bit of an occasion, really, because when legislation is debated in this place, the Opposition traditionally complain that it is not given enough time, that the Government have tried to rush it through or that there has been insufficient examination of the

provisions. The shadow Minister seems to be setting a precedent here today, in that he seems to be complaining that the Bill has been given too much time. Why is that?

Karl Turner: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me to continue, I will make the point in a moment that important issues were debated in VTAB that are not now going to be discussed or made into legislation.

As a result of breaking up VTAB, measures that were previously included have been dropped, and measures that could have been included to improve this legislation through new clauses and amendments can no longer be added because they are no longer within the scope of forthcoming Bills. The proposal to make the shining of lasers at vehicles or control towers an enforceable criminal offence, which was strongly supported by those on this side of the House and which we would still be happy to support, has been dropped altogether. That is clearly concerning. We do not want to see avoidable disasters brought about by the malicious use of laser pens, and neither does the Minister, so will he explain why he has dropped these crucial plans, and whether or indeed when he proposes to legislate to tackle this serious problem?

There is also nothing in the Bill on the inclusion of much-needed regulations on drones—a matter previously caught by VTAB. The Government will respond to the consultation on drones in the next few weeks, but they should have made much more progress already, including making decisions on whether the UK should follow other countries by establishing a compulsory registration scheme and getting systematic geo-fencing in place to physically prevent drones from getting near airports and other places where they have the potential to be so dangerous.

It makes no sense for the Government to have abandoned the Bill in which action on drones could have been included. These are decisions that will make aviation less safe than it should be. The latest figures show that 33 such incidents were confirmed in the first five months of this year, and 70 last year, whereas there were 29 in 2015 and just 10 in the preceding five years. We need legislation to regulate the use of drones in order to tackle the worrying trend of near misses with planes. The aviation industry has been clear that it needs the Government to act on these concerns now. The Opposition have been pressing the Government on this issue for many years. Without action, it is a question of when, rather than if, a passenger plane is involved in a drone-related incident, so will the Minister explain why the proposal has been dropped and what plans he has to put this right?

We are just one month into this new Parliament and the Government are already running out of steam, which is why we have been debating this Bill on the Floor of the House rather than upstairs in Committee. The Prime Minister is attempting to crowd source policy ideas from the Opposition, and we can assist in this instance. The Government need to bring forward legislation on the misuse of lasers and on the regulation of drones and to provide clarity and certainty for UK aviation post-Brexit. We would welcome the Government adopting those policies, and they will have our full support if they do so. Labour broadly supports the Bill, because it extends protections to many more holidaymakers, but we want clarity on how EU-based companies, which will no longer be subject to ATOL but rather their

[*Karl Turner*]

respective member state equivalents, will provide protection to UK consumers. We want the best possible framework to ensure that the sector flourishes, but that means adequately preparing ourselves for the many implications that Brexit will have for ATOL and our aviation sector as a whole.

6.30 pm

Patricia Gibson: I end where I began by welcoming and supporting the Government's measures to update the ATOL scheme to provide more protection for passengers when they go on holiday and to align it with the latest EU directives. I welcome the progress made in this evening's debate, but I was disappointed to hear the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) complain that today's process has taken too long. If he sees that as a problem, I suggest that he perhaps contributed to it with his extensive remarks. I am sure that we all enjoyed them, but he seems to have contributed to the problem that he identified.

Karl Turner: I did not complain that the process was taking too long; I simply made the point that time in this House is incredibly important. An awful lot of things that were discussed during the proceedings on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill could have made this legislation, but time has been wasted. These matters took 45 minutes in Committee. That was my point.

Patricia Gibson: I believe that the Minister has taken on board the legitimate concerns expressed tonight about how consumers are to be protected and have their current rights guaranteed as we head towards a post-Brexit world. There must be no diminution or stagnation of passenger rights as society and technology advance. It has been heartening to see how the Bill has proceeded through the House, and I have been delighted to be a part of these debates.

6.32 pm

Mr John Hayes: I do not want to delay the House, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sure that the Minister is going to beg the leave of the House to address the House again.

Mr Hayes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I do not want to detain the House unduly except to affirm my thanks to all Members who have contributed to the debate. I hear what the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) says about the previous Bill. He drew attention to those elements of the Bill that are not being considered today. This legislation is very much part of that earlier Bill, but we made it clear in the Queen's Speech that we intend to introduce further transport legislation. I am happy to continue to have conversations about drones and lasers along the lines that he suggested. It has been a good debate, and it is a good Bill. I think we can leave it at that.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

High Speed 2: Electronic Deposit of Documents

6.33 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): I beg to move,

That, in respect of any bill relating to High Speed 2 that is read the first time in Session 2017–19 and to which the standing orders relating to private business are found by the Examiners of Petitions for Private Bills to apply, it shall be sufficient compliance with:

(a) any requirement under those standing orders for a document to be deposited or delivered at, or sent to, an office of a government department, body or person if it is deposited or delivered at, sent to or otherwise made accessible at that office in electronic form;

(b) any requirement under those standing orders for a document to be deposited with an officer if it is deposited with or delivered, sent or otherwise made accessible to that officer in electronic form;

(c) any requirement under those standing orders for a document to be made available for inspection at a prescribed office, or to permit a document to be inspected, if it is made available for inspection at that office, or is permitted to be inspected, in electronic form;

(d) the requirement under Standing Order 27(4) or 36(3) relating to private business to permit a person to make copies of a document or extracts from it, if there is provided to that person, on request and within a reasonable time, copies of so much of it as the person may reasonably require and such copies may, if the person so agrees, be provided in electronic form;

(e) the requirement under Standing Order 27(4) relating to private business for a memorial to be made on every document deposited under that Standing Order, if the memorial is made on a separate document;

(f) any requirement under Standing Order 4A(1), 27A(6) or 224A(8) relating to private business to make a document available for sale at prescribed offices, if it is made available for sale at an office in London.

That this Order shall not affect any requirement under those standing orders to deposit any document at, or deliver any document to, the Private Bill Office or the Vote Office.

That any reference in those standing orders to a document which is deposited, lodged, delivered or sent under those standing orders includes a reference to a document which is so deposited, delivered or sent in electronic form.

That any reference to a document in this order includes a reference to any bill, plan, section, book of reference, ordnance map, environmental or other statement or estimate.

The Gracious Speech gave notice of the Government's intention to introduce a hybrid Bill to Parliament later this year to take forward the next phase of HS2. As a hybrid Bill it will be governed by the Standing Orders for private business. Parliament's review of those Standing Orders, following the passage of the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Act 2017, has not yet concluded and is the first significant review since 1948. It is therefore necessary to move this motion to update parliamentary procedure to reflect developments in technology since 1948.

I will briefly explain the changes, which replicate those authorised by the House in 2013 ahead of the introduction of the previous hybrid Bill. The House will be aware that, along with the HS2 hybrid Bill later this year, we will provide Parliament with an environmental statement setting out the likely significant environmental effects of the scheme and making proposals for alleviating those effects.

A considerable level of detail is involved in a project of this magnitude. We expect the statement to be up to 12,000 pages long. It is, of course, important that local communities can easily find out what the impact will be on their local area. However, current Standing Orders require us to deposit a paper copy of the document in every local authority area along the line of route. In this day and age that is inconvenient for the communities involved, especially for parish councils, many of which do not have sufficient space, so they ask us to deliver the document elsewhere—often to a library in a nearby town. That is why the motion allows for the electronic deposit of documentation for the HS2 hybrid Bill.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I seriously oppose the project, which runs straight through my constituency. Will the Minister be good enough to give an undertaking that written material of the kind he describes will be provided? I understand why it should be in electronic form.

Michael Ellis: It is a permissive power. It does not require documents to be deposited in electronic format only. If a deposit location wants all the documents in hard copy, HS2 Ltd will provide them in hard copy, but the motion allows for the electronic deposit of documentation for the HS2 hybrid Bill. Electronic documentation will, of course, make it easier for communities along the line of route to find the information most relevant to their area without having to work through an otherwise enormous document.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What would happen if, because of the cruelty of this Government, the libraries are closed and there is no room for the hard copies of the Bill documentation, even though the local area wanted them? How would the Minister handle that?

Michael Ellis: I do not accept my right hon. Friend's characterisation. On previous occasions when there have been storage problems, nearby community libraries have been asked to store the hard copies, so I anticipate alternative mechanisms could be put in place.

It should be noted that this is a permissive power. It does not require documents to be deposited only in an electronic format, so if a location wants all the documents in hard copy, HS2 Ltd will provide them in hard copy. In all cases HS2 Ltd will make the key documents, such as the Bill itself and the non-technical summary of the environmental statement, available in hard copy.

Further, members of the public will be able to telephone HS2 Ltd to ask for free hard copies of the non-technical summary, the local community area report and the local maps. If a deposit location would like documents in electronic form but does not have the equipment to make them available to the community, HS2 Ltd will provide that equipment at its own expense.

This is a wholly sensible modernisation of Standing Order requirements that were originally conceived in the 19th century, and it is about making it easier for people to engage with the hybrid Bill process, thereby ensuring the most effective decision making by Parliament.

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend has quietly referred to the maps, but of course there are also the specifications and the limits of deviation. He knows perfectly well

how much all this involves. May I have an assurance that, if required, all those things will also be made available in hard copy?

Michael Ellis: Yes, that is a reasonable request.

This is a wholly sensible modernisation of Standing Order requirements, and it is about making it easier for people to engage with the hybrid Bill process. I commend this motion to the House.

6.39 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for his explanation of the changes to the Standing Orders for the purposes of this hybrid Bill. Hybrid Bills are a rarity in the House: a public Bill proposing a law that affects the private interests of a particular person or organisation. This Bill will affect the general public and specific households along the route of the HS2 line, phase 2. The House has agreed these changes in similar circumstances for phase 1 of the HS2 project from London to the west midlands. These changes relate to phase 2, which allows for the construction of the route from Birmingham to Crewe, which are approximately 50 miles apart. These changes to the Standing Orders allowing for electronic copies of documents to be made available are eminently sensible, but may I ask the Deputy Leader of the House to clarify a couple of things?

Paragraph (d) of the motion states:

“copies of so much of it as the person may reasonably require and such copies may, if the person so agrees, be provided in electronic form”.

Will the Deputy Leader of the House confirm that those documents will not unreasonably be withheld and that the requests will be complied with? I appreciate that people cannot ask for documents outside their area, where they do not have an interest, but who will make the decision as to whether a request is a “reasonable” one? Will he also confirm that households along the Birmingham to Crewe route, who will be directly affected, will be able to receive a free copy of the documents relating to their area? The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has suggested that some rural areas may not have internet access and some people may not be proficient in IT, but these people should have those documents free of charge. Will the Deputy Leader of the House confirm that they will be free of charge? He mentioned a telephone number that people can call HS2 on. Will he confirm that that will not be at the premium rate and it will be free of charge? Will he say when we are likely to have the First Reading of the Bill? Will we see it before the House rises for the summer recess?

I am sure we could agree a general amendment to Standing Orders, through the Procedure Committee, so that we do not have to keep coming back to amend them to include a reference to electronic copies. However, Her Majesty's Opposition support these changes to the Standing Orders, which are in line with previous amendments to Standing Orders.

6.42 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The House will not be surprised that I rise to my feet to talk about this small motion, but colleagues sitting

[*Mrs Cheryl Gillan*]

alongside me may be surprised to learn that I rise to welcome it. As a veteran of the hybrid Bill process, I can say that there is no doubt that it is arcane and has tremendous problems with its practices and procedures. My constituents, and many constituents of other hon. Members, certainly have been at the mercy of the hybrid Bill process, and I shudder when I hear a Front Bencher say that the environmental statement will be at least 12,000 pages long. I have experienced something just as large for phase 1 of the HS2 process, and I can say that these are indeed very opaque documents. Will the Deputy Leader of the House say whether these will be sufficiently navigable instruments, as this is being served up to people electronically? I found, as did many of my constituents, that the documents presented by HS2 Ltd were very difficult to navigate and hard to find. Therefore, I would like assurances that some improvements have been made to the way in which people can move around these very large documents.

The Deputy Leader of the House has already given assurances that nothing in tonight's order will prevent communities from accessing paper copies. We must not forget that there is a digital divide. Many of the people affected by this project are elderly and do not access large documents easily on computers. It is very important that they have access, free of charge, to those sections of the documentation that relate to their properties or the area around that part of the route.

Sir William Cash: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when this material comes electronically and then has to be turned, at a person's home or office, into the kind of material that makes sense and that they can read, the complexity of the documents—the design specifications and all the other things—and the monumental volume of paper becomes very daunting indeed? To refer back to our previous debate on consultation, does she also agree that HS2 Ltd, as I said to the project manager the other day, had better get its act together on consultation and do it properly?

Mrs Gillan: It is clear to me and many others who are involved with the project that HS2 Ltd needs to improve not only its consultation processes but its communications processes, which are still appalling in many instances.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene to make a small but important point. She just raised the issue of older people often not being familiar with technology and electronically conveyed documents. Older people often suffer from visual impairments; indeed, some of them will need a Braille copy. Will she seek assurances from the Government that those who are at a disadvantage in reading documents will have assistance?

Mrs Gillan: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I am keen to ensure that, in a process that is so inequitable, with the state against the citizen and the citizen receiving very little help, we impress on Ministers and HS2 Ltd that there are people who need assistance to navigate and understand these documents. I feel passionately that they need to have that assistance. Had the hon. Lady seen people who are going to lose their house having to appear alone before a Select Committee of this House, with a silk—a QC; an expensive, highly paid

barrister—set against them, she would understand why I implore Ministers to make sure that suitable personnel are available to help people to interpret and access the documents. The shadow Minister asked for the telephone line to be free; I am going to go further: I want Ministers to ensure that that telephone line is manned by competent people who actually know what they are talking about and can guide people through the process easily. That is extremely important.

I am disappointed that there is currently no provision that will allow petitioners to petition electronically when the Bill is introduced—unless Ministers tell me differently. I had to bring petitions from constituents into the House myself, and they were charged £20 for the pleasure of defending their own properties, so I had to collect money and documents and bring them in to facilitate the process. My constituency is not far outside London; the people who will be affected by the phase 2 Bill live much further up the country. I would have thought Ministers had considered how other MPs' constituents who are going to be affected by phase 2 will be able to submit their petitions this time around. I implore Ministers to look into that, because that is a matter of priority. We should wipe out the £20 fee, which is neither fish nor fowl; it is an insult to the people who are defending their properties and want their voices to be heard and it certainly does not cover the costs of this exercise, so I hope it will be cancelled.

I have another question, on paragraph (f) of the motion, which the Deputy Leader of the House will notice refers to

"any requirement under Standing Order 4A(1), 27A(6) or 224A(8) relating to private business to make a document available for sale at prescribed offices, if it is made available for sale at an office in London."

Will he assure me that that does not mean that London will be the only place that such documents will be on sale? When the Bill is introduced, phase 2 will affect people from Birmingham northwards, so would it not be more sensible to make the documents available in, for example, Birmingham and Manchester? That would be of more assistance to the people affected by the project.

I would like to know when the Bill will be introduced and when Second Reading is anticipated. When we have another hybrid Bill of this size and complexity that affects so many people, it is important that as much warning as possible is given by the Government and by HS2 Ltd and that all the information is readily available well in advance and with explanation so that people can get their heads around it. There is no doubt that there will be support for the phase 2 Bill from all parts of the House. Once again, there will be a very small number of MPs opposed to it or raising questions about it, but the Government need not be afraid that they will not get their business through. However, if they are to embark on a project of this size and complexity, I ask them please to learn from the lessons and the mistakes that were made on phase 1, and not to put the people on phase 2 through the same agonies. If we do not learn and we do not then take action, we are failing people in this country.

6.50 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I was not originally going to speak, but I will just say a couple of words if that is okay. As the shadow Leader

of the House said, the changes are eminently sensible. It makes sense to move to electronic issue where possible. However, I gently point out that some Members who are exercised by this electronic issue and are worried about access to hard copies are quite comfortable for people on benefits to be forced to move to online activity. We need to remember that there is a disparity in attitudes.

I agree with much of what the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) said, especially with regard to consultation. People must be able to interact with experts—experts with an understanding of the documents should be able to explain them to people in an impartial way and guide them through the maps. Some people have difficulty reading both hard-copy and online maps, so it is very important that they can access the information and understand it. The Government must ensure that, with any consultation, people are able fully to understand the information.

Can the Deputy Leader of the House tell me whether any savings have been identified through this measure? It seems sensible that there should be savings, as we will not be issuing reams of paper. Equally, that is balanced out with a rather generous offer of giving out IT equipment. Has any assessment been made of how much IT equipment will need to be dispersed?

6.52 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I have already made a couple of interventions, but I wish to say that I am extremely grateful to my very distinguished and right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) for all the work that she has done on phase 1, which has set a pattern for what is to be done on the second phase, which so directly and detrimentally affects my own constituency. Before the Minister replies, may I make one suggestion? Birmingham has been mentioned. If we take the line between Birmingham and Crewe, the most central place happens to be Stafford in Staffordshire. Will my hon. Friend be good enough to give serious consideration to using the county council facilities, which are extremely good, for copying and all that sort of thing? People from my constituency, at both ends of the line, would be able to visit that central point with a minimum amount of inconvenience. That is all that I need to say for the time being.

6.53 pm

Michael Ellis: With the leave of the House, I will, in the limited time available, answer some of these points. The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) asked what was meant by “reasonable”. The issue is simply this: a reasonable request means HS2 weighing up the cost of meeting a request against whether there is a genuine need for the information to be presented in the format requested. Reasonable requests for hard copies of maps and section drawings will be met. They could be requested from local authorities, which will be provided with hard copies for inspection, or directly from HS2.

I have been asked by a couple of hon. Members about when the Bill will be laid. At this point, I can only say soon. As I have said, all reasonable requests for hard copies of maps and section drawings will be met. In answer to a point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), we are proactively considering using audio, braille, and

easy-read versions. Given the scale of the documentation, it is right that that is considered with regard to accessibility for everyone. I noted the points made about the telephone line, and I shall look into the matter. I understand that it is a London number, to answer the question from the hon. Member for Walsall South about the rate, but I will look into that.

On the issues about London and whether documents could be stored elsewhere, a tiny number of people have requested that, but we will certainly look into those reasonable requests.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Is it planned to translate the documents into other languages?

Michael Ellis: I am not aware of any such plans. We are considering the issue of braille.

Mrs Gillan: Will the Minister tell me what the appeal process is if HS2 Ltd does not deem a request to be reasonable?

Michael Ellis: It is fair to say that all reasonable requests will be considered. It is clear and transparent that reasonable requests will be met. It is important that requests are not vexatious, and I know that my right hon. Friend does not want any doubt about that. Reasonable requests will be met, and further consideration can be given to that in due course. This is a sensible modernisation of 19th-century Standing Orders, which have not undergone radical reform since 1948.

Sir William Cash: I know that a lot of questions were put to the Minister, but would he respond to the question of whether Stafford and Staffordshire County Council buildings are a convenient place for people to go for documents?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is alive to all the issues that have been raised, including the localities and local communities involved. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) asked whether Staffordshire would be considered, and I can tell him that it will be.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That, in respect of any bill relating to High Speed 2 that is read the first time in Session 2017–19 and to which the standing orders relating to private business are found by the Examiners of Petitions for Private Bills to apply, it shall be sufficient compliance with:

- (a) any requirement under those standing orders for a document to be deposited or delivered at, or sent to, an office of a government department, body or person if it is deposited or delivered at, sent to or otherwise made accessible at that office in electronic form;
- (b) any requirement under those standing orders for a document to be deposited with an officer if it is deposited with or delivered, sent or otherwise made accessible to that officer in electronic form;
- (c) any requirement under those standing orders for a document to be made available for inspection at a prescribed office, or to permit a document to be inspected, if it is made available for inspection at that office, or is permitted to be inspected, in electronic form;
- (d) the requirement under Standing Order 27(4) or 36(3) relating to private business to permit a person to make copies of a document or extracts from it, if there is provided to that person,

[Michael Ellis]

on request and within a reasonable time, copies of so much of it as the person may reasonably require and such copies may, if the person so agrees, be provided in electronic form;

(e) the requirement under Standing Order 27(4) relating to private business for a memorial to be made on every document deposited under that Standing Order, if the memorial is made on a separate document;

(f) any requirement under Standing Order 4A(1), 27A(6) or 224A(8) relating to private business to make a document available for sale at prescribed offices, if it is made available for sale at an office in London.

That this Order shall not affect any requirement under those standing orders to deposit any document at, or deliver any document to, the Private Bill Office or the Vote Office.

That any reference in those standing orders to a document which is deposited, lodged, delivered or sent under those standing orders includes a reference to a document which is so deposited, delivered or sent in electronic form.

That any reference to a document in this order includes a reference to any bill, plan, section, book of reference, ordnance map, environmental or other statement or estimate.

Mental Health Act 1983

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

6.57 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), in the Chamber. I hope—she is still smiling—that she is in a benevolent and co-operative mood.

As the Minister will be aware, I am raising a small but important matter, in my opinion and that of others, by seeking a small change to section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. She will probably have been made aware that I have raised the matter twice before, for the first time when I presented a ten-minute rule Bill in 2014. I did not proceed with that measure because there was an ongoing Government review of the whole section. Although that review was extensive, it did not consider the specific point that I am raising this evening. The second occasion was almost exactly a year ago, when I raised the matter in an Adjournment debate.

I was initially prompted to seek the change having seen the need for it at first hand on the streets of London. I was with a couple of young officers from the Met in a response car, and our first call was a dash to a flat on the 14th floor of a council residential tower block. The mother of the household nervously let the officers in, and we saw her daughter, aged 22, standing on the window ledge threatening to jump. We quickly established that the daughter had a history of genuine suicide attempts. As the young lady was clearly put out by the uniformed police officers, we were joined very promptly by three further officers, two of them in plain clothes. Fortunately, one of those officers was female.

That officer was very astute and persuasive, and managed to get the young woman to come down off the window sill, sit down on the bed and talk matters through. The young woman made it quite clear that she needed psychiatric help. Much effort was made to persuade her to go to a place of safety for psychiatric and medical aid. The young woman vehemently refused and, when pressed, she struggled to head for the window and jump yet again.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Sir Paul Beresford: The other four officers stood on tip-toes waiting to catch the young woman on each occasion when she looked as if she was going to dive through the window. Fortunately, they managed to stop any action. In the meantime, contact was made with St George's Hospital's psychiatric unit to seek urgent hospital psychiatric assistance. After some considerable time, the appropriate psychiatric individual arrived with an ambulance and crew. This immediately inspired further alarm, rejection and, ultimately, a huge struggle. In due course, a sad young lady was transported to the hospital as the designated place of safety, and we had prevented the suicide.

The whole pantomime had occupied five officers and three NHS staff, and took about four hours to sort out. It was obvious from the very beginning that the police themselves could have taken care of the young lady quickly, as indeed they did after instruction from the NHS staff. Immediate action by the police would have taken the lady into care quickly, thus reducing the continuing risk over those four hours, and saving the police and NHS staff a large number of man hours. Under section 136 of the Mental Health Act, the police would have been able to act promptly if this pantomime had taken place in a public place. However, the incident took place at the young lady's mother's home. That was deemed, correctly, to be a private place, which meant that no direct police action was legally possible. I have had discussions with officers in the Met, and I have found that this was not an unusual case.

A more tragic case was the death of Martin Middleton in 2010. He was taken to a Leeds police station by officers who had visited him at home, having been made aware, and then seeing for themselves, that Mr Middleton was making serious preparations for committing suicide. The officers incorrectly believed that they could arrest Mr Middleton and take him from his home under section 136. When they arrived at the police station, the custody sergeant refused to detain Mr Middleton as the arrest had taken place in his home. The officers were therefore required by the custody sergeant to return Mr Middleton to a relative's home, hoping that that was some form of safety. Sadly, Mr Middleton still managed to hang himself there.

At the inquest, the coroner had no hesitation in agreeing with Professor Keith Rix, who was called to give expert evidence, that Mr Middleton fell into a category of mentally disordered persons for whom there is no provision under the 1983 Act. Subsequent to raising the issue, I have heard from many frontline police officers, including those who have campaigned on the issue, and I have also had extensive conversations with Professor Keith Rix, who is an academic psychiatrist and an expert in this area. I am reliably informed that the Garda in the Republic of Ireland have a clear operational advantage over our police because, under section 12 of the Irish Mental Health Act 2001, they can act promptly, even in a private residence.

As the all-seeing Minister will be aware, over the 10 years between 1997 and 2007, admissions to hospital as a place of safety went up from 2,237 to 7,035—those are the latest figures that I have been able to get. The Minister is quick with arithmetic, so she will be able to note that that is a threefold increase. The difficulty facing the police is that the powers on which they can act are limited to persons found by the police in a public place. There is ample anecdotal—and perhaps stronger—evidence that the police in desperation sometimes persuade a person to leave their home, or contrive to remove them to a public place so that they can use the section 136 powers of arrest. In fact, one London-based social services authority's audited figures estimated that 30% of section 136 arrests were recorded as having been made at or just outside the detainee's home. The police do that in sheer desperation to save the individual's life, which would be lost unless they acted. Put bluntly, a tiny adjustment to the legislation would allow the police to act in a private home, as they can in a public place. That would save an enormous amount of time and, potentially, a considerable number of lives.

In my discussions about this, it has been suggested that the police already have sufficient powers—they do not. The second argument is that an amendment would extend the right of the police to enter private properties—yes, it would. There are many legal reasons for the police to enter a private property; perhaps the most obvious and linked one is that if the mentally ill person was threatening, or in the process of murdering, somebody in that private place, rather than killing themselves, the police could act immediately.

There is a simple solution to this: amend section 136 by simply removing the words “in a place to which the public have access”.

When I raised this issue in the Adjournment debate about a year ago, the Minister's predecessor gave a clear indication that change was being considered. He gave me a commitment that if the Government could not get this right using the measures they were considering, an amendment to section 136 might be exactly what was required.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an important and thoughtful speech. Does he agree that it is possible at the moment for a mental health professional who wants to put someone under section 2 or section 3 of the Mental Health Act to gain entry to their house with the police and a locksmith? It therefore seems strange that the police do not have powers to deal with a very similar situation when they have concerns about someone's mental health and believe they need to exercise section 136 powers.

Sir Paul Beresford: I thank my hon. Friend, who is, of course, on his way, with a bit of luck, to being a very senior academic psychiatrist in a couple of years. He is right. In situations such as this, no one rings up St George's Hospital in Tooting and says, “Please could I have a psychiatrist?” They ring the Met police, who then have the difficulty of dealing with the situation, and who stand there holding the detainee in the private home while the psychiatrist is brought in from the hospital.

I shall be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister will at least be prepared to meet me and Professor Rix to discuss how this difficulty can be sorted out. If necessary, I am prepared to resort, as I have in the past, to the ten-minute rule Bill procedure to bring about this tiny change.

7.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) not only on securing the debate, but on the measured way he has approached it. He highlighted some of the really serious challenges faced by the police and the emergency services in dealing effectively, but also humanely, with those who are in a mental health crisis. We can all agree that this is a very important topic.

For far too long, the subject of mental ill health has not received appropriate attention. The services for those experiencing mental ill health are sometimes not

[Sarah Newton]

what they should be, and people have been faced with long waits for the help and support they should have received.

However, the Government have made clear their utter determination to improve mental health services, and we have made considerable progress in recent years to address the serious concerns we are discussing tonight. In particular, the use of police cells as places of safety under the Mental Health Act has fallen significantly. Last year, it was down to as few as only 2,100 instances. Some forces, such as Hertfordshire and Merseyside, have achieved zero use of police stations, while others, including West Midlands, Suffolk, Nottinghamshire, Lancashire and Lincolnshire, have very low usage—right down in the single figures. We expect to see significant improvement when the numbers come out in October.

This has been brought about by a lot of good local partnership working. Only last week, I was with the police and mental health services in Kent, introducing their new strategy, which involves innovative working between the police and local health partners so that they can respond effectively and swiftly to those who are suffering mental ill health. It is also about bringing together the voluntary sector to enhance the support for local people. There are similar partnerships all over the country as part of the crisis care concordat partnership networks, which are driving forward really good improvements.

Most police forces will now have street triage schemes. This means that, although they are quite different in different parts of the country, most police officers will be deployed alongside mental health professionals, so if a call comes into the centre that somebody is experiencing a problem of the type we have heard about, mental health professionals will be sent along with the police officers as they respond. Alongside the reduction in the use of police cells, we have seen a reduction in the use of section 136 powers as these decisions are being made by health professionals to make sure that somebody in such a crisis can get the care that they need immediately. We have seen really good examples in Norfolk and in the west midlands, with dramatic falls in the number of people being sectioned. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this excellent work. In the meantime, I will send him examples that he could perhaps take up with his local police force to make sure that it is drawing on the best possible practice from around the country.

We have increased the availability of liaison and diversion schemes so that those entering the criminal justice system who have mental ill-health or substance misuse issues can be immediately identified and referred into suitable assessment or treatment. These schemes now cover about 75% of the population of England, and we are on track to provide national coverage by 2021. We have provided some £15 million to 88 local projects to increase the provision and capacity of health-based places of safety, focusing on the areas with particularly high use of police cells and limited places of safety. We have announced a further £15 million of funding to continue this vital work.

Just as importantly, we are also bolstering our mental health services. We are investing record levels in mental health and improving access by introducing the first-ever waiting times standards for treatment. We have invested

£400 million to improve mental health crisis care in the community and £250 million to establish liaison mental health services in every emergency department by 2020. Since 2010, we have increased spending on mental health to a record £11.6 billion in 2016-17, and a further £1 billion will be invested every year by 2020-21 so that we can deliver the mental health services that people richly deserve.

In addition to this, we are making £1.4 billion available by 2020 for children and young people's mental health services.

Sir Paul Beresford: I do, of course, applaud the Government's work in this field. However, I am talking about the particular emergency situation where someone is sitting in a police car, a radio call comes through, they tear up to the incident, and they are two miles away from St George's hospital and the psychiatrist who visits it. They need to do something on the spot.

Sarah Newton: I very much appreciate my hon. Friend's specific point. I wanted to set the scene and describe to him the scale of the investment to ensure that we do have the appropriate medical professional to accompany the police. I think we can all agree that we need those trained mental health professionals to be able to assess the person and to make the best judgment call on the best way to treat them. It is unreasonable to expect a police officer to have enough clinical experience to be able to make that call.

Like my hon. Friend, I have spent time with my local armed police officers. I have been out on the beat. I have seen the extent to which, in the course of their everyday working, they encounter people who have mental health problems, and how brilliant they are at handling the situation. We have heard vividly about how well they are able to manage it, as he has seen himself, but that is usually about containing it. They are not qualified to assess the best clinical approach for the individual in the way that a mental health professional is.

Sir Paul Beresford: I completely agree. If section 136 is used in a public place—and if it were used in a private place—the individual goes into care in a mental hospital environment and must be assessed within 72 hours. That is an added protection. No one expects policemen to be wonders on psychiatry, but the assessment follows very quickly.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and he will be pleased with recent legislation that has reduced that timeframe from 72 to 24 hours. That is a big step forward. Whether an incident happens in a public place or in someone's home, we are working towards a situation where a mental health professional will be with the police when they attend. That means that there will be no delay similar to that described so vividly by my hon. Friend. I think that some of the examples he gave happened some time ago. As a result of investment, particularly in the work of the crisis care concordat, which has created the framework for police forces to work with mental health services in their community, all kinds of innovative measures have been introduced to ensure that resources, including mental health nurses routinely working with police officers on the beat and specialist back-up to deal with situations

similar to those we have heard about this evening, are planned and delivered locally. That is how we want things to happen.

As I have said, we are putting the resources in place. Although these services are working in most of the country, additional investment is being provided where that is not the case. There is also support through the crisis care concordat to fill those gaps and to ensure that everyone everywhere has the same experience.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend is making some thoughtful and good points about the extra resources that are going in to support people with a mental illness. On section 136 powers, the mental health professional who accompanies the police is often a nurse, and they do not have powers to section people. A section 12-approved doctor who accompanies the police, however, does have powers to section people, and the same is true under sections 2 and 3 of the Mental Health Act. I think that is where my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) is coming from.

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. The point I was trying to make is that a range of health professionals are working alongside the police in different settings to make sure that their response is appropriate. Sometimes it is mental health nurses who will be on the beat with police officers. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley said that the police were called because somebody was in a very aggravated and stressful situation and they might have been prepared to take their own life. A call handler at the emergency centre would triage that situation, understand its severity and send the appropriately qualified medical professional so that they can make those decisions.

I think we are largely in agreement on the progress we have made. I want to focus on my hon. Friend's key point, which is that he does not think that the police have sufficient powers to act quickly in relation to people in private homes who are mentally distressed. I have read through his previous contributions and I am sympathetic to his point. I appreciate how utterly frustrating it must be for police officers who find themselves in a situation where they feel helpless to take action in a reasonable amount of time when they would have those

powers if they were in a public place. Having read previous debates and contributions, however, I think it is right that we consider somebody's home differently from a public place. For most people, their home is their refuge. It is a special place. We allow people to do all sorts of things in their homes that we do not allow them to do in a public place. We have to reflect carefully before taking more powers on the state to allow us to intervene in people's private space. We seek to strike the right balance so that we can intervene to keep people safe and ensure that they get access to services without violating their privacy. We have consulted quite widely on the matter, and we considered it when we were looking at a review of the legislation. There was a lot of discussion about it, and the view was that we had struck the right balance and did not need to take the extra step that my hon. Friend wants us to take.

New powers have been introduced, as I mentioned, in the Policing and Crime Act 2017, and we are monitoring how they are working. I reassure my hon. Friend that if that monitoring suggests that we can or should do more, we will take further action. We expect to see a lot more data from the police this autumn about how sections 135 and 136 are implemented on the ground. We will be analysing the results of a new annual data return to establish whether there are any new trends or patterns that need further response. We will have the opportunity to consider the whole issue in the round as we look, as promised, at the Mental Health Act.

I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and any other colleagues who have a close interest in this policy area, along with Professor Rix and officials from the Department of Health and the Home Office, to make sure that we have this absolutely right. We want to join up mental health professionals and police professionals appropriately to prevent the sorts of situations that we have heard about this evening. I look forward to building on the good progress that we have made, and I will continue to work well with my hon. Friend to make sure that that happens.

Question put and agreed to.

7.21 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 12 July 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members, in so far as a reminder is required, that the ballot for the election of Select Committee Chairs is taking place today until 4 pm in Committee Room 8. The results will be announced when they are available; that is a statement of the blindingly obvious, but it is what it says here, to which I add, if this is helpful, that I expect to announce the results of the ballots at the end of the debate on Grenfell Tower this evening.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Aid Programmes: Africa

1. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of UK aid programmes in Africa. [900363]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): UK aid plays a vital role in helping the world's poorest and tackling global challenges such as disease migration and terrorism. In Africa, since 2015, we have provided humanitarian assistance to 13.7 million people.

John Mann: I congratulate the Secretary of State on her announcement this week on population. Given what Mrs Gates said about the impact on migration, will the Secretary of State consider how the core funding for organisations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation and Marie Stopes International can be reinstated to allow those organisations to deliver what they have been doing effectively for some years?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; these are important organisations. Of course, the United Kingdom has led the way on the whole issue of family planning, as we showed yesterday through the summit we held. We are constantly looking at how we can work with important partners on that critical issue and, in particular, on family planning and modern methods of contraception. We will of course review these programmes, too, as all programmes are always under review.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): In welcoming the fab decision by the Prime Minister to appoint a joint Minister from the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office to

sub-Saharan Africa, will the Secretary of State confirm what her priorities are for driving forward Her Majesty's Government's priorities in Africa, rather than just DFID and FCO priorities?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to commend the fact that the two Departments are working together on Africa. There is a very good reason for that. We are, of course, one HMG—one Government—and our priorities are the same priorities when it comes to Africa: tackling the big issues of disease, migration and economic development, which is critical, and growing regions such as Africa so that they can become our trading partners.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): What is the Secretary of State's assessment of the current humanitarian and political situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? In particular, what are the Government doing to assist in tackling the humanitarian crisis there, and also to ensure that Congo can move to democratic elections as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Select Committee, and congratulate him on his reappointment to that role. He is right to stress the significance of what is going on in the DRC. The situation is very worrying; there are many humanitarian pressures that we know of in-country, and the current electoral and democratic situation is not sustainable. We are of course working on the ground and with our partners to ensure that we continue to provide the support that is necessary to get the country back on track.

14. [900376] **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): In recent years, UK aid has played a key role in helping Ethiopia to become more resilient to crises by ensuring that people have a safety net so that they do not starve when a crisis hits. Does the Secretary of State agree that the British public can be immensely proud of all the work this Government have done?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. I visited Ethiopia again recently—just a month ago—and saw UK aid in action. There is no doubt about the fact that UK aid is keeping people alive in the humanitarian situation, with the drought taking place there. However, at the same time, we are supporting the industrialisation of Ethiopia, with trade opportunities and British firms now creating jobs in the country.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Independent Commission for Aid Impact has reported that UK development assistance to Africa was down by a massive £20 million in 2016 and warned that Africa is losing out on aid spending as the Government divert money to countries in Europe and Asia. Considering that Africa has the highest proportion of population living in extreme poverty, will the Secretary of State update the House on what she intends to do to reverse the cuts and to ensure Africa does not lose out on funding from DFID?

Priti Patel: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new role and congratulate her on joining the Opposition Front-Bench team in that role.

We have the 0.7% commitment, of course, which we are proud of, and 74% of that is spent on DFID programming. The majority of that money goes to Africa programmes, but it is important to recognise a couple of points. There is an enormous humanitarian crisis in Africa right now, and we have throughout the year scaled up, and led the way in calling on other donors to put more money into Africa famine relief. We are also working across all Government Departments to ensure that Africa is a development priority.

Humanitarian Crisis: Syria

2. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on ensuring that the Government's operations in Syria help to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in that country. [900364]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Defence and other ministerial colleagues in response to the conflict in Syria, and of course we are doing more on the humanitarian side as well.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Secretary of State tell us what measures her Department is taking to ensure that civilians are able to leave Raqqa safely, and what information it is giving them on escape routes?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady highlights the terrible situation of the mass conflict involved in the recapturing of Raqqa. The regional support that we are providing includes medical supplies, food and shelter—all the basics that people in the region need. She asks specifically about information. We are working with our partners on the ground, who are working in very challenging situations, to give them information and guidance as to where the safe places are for them to go.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We might not reach the question tabled by the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), so if she wants to come in now, she can, although it is not obligatory.

7. [900369] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): How kind! May I use this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your support for Singing for Syrians? I also thank the Department for International Development for its support. As a result of all the support we have received from across the House, Singing for Syrians is now able to support not only medical aid in Syria but a school for disabled children. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that aid is always worth more when it is spent in the region, and that what the people caught up in this terrible conflict really want is to be able to stay as close to home as possible?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I congratulate her and everyone else who has been involved in Singing for Syrians. It is an incredible charity, and I commend her for her work. She is right to highlight the fact that providing support in region is what makes a difference in terms of changing and saving lives. We have led the way in this. The United Kingdom has spent

more than £2.46 billion in Syria and the region, providing hope and opportunity to those who have been displaced through conflict.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is quite obvious that senior Ministers in the Government wish to expand this conflict to target actors other than Daesh in Syria. Has the Secretary of State made an assessment of what that would mean for her Department on the ground, and is she being the voice of reason in cautioning against expanding the conflict?

Priti Patel: It is wrong to suggest that we are expanding any conflict at all. The focus of this Government, particularly from the humanitarian perspective, is to ensure that UK aid goes to the people who are suffering as a result of the bleak situation on the ground right now. Of course we are working across Government and with our partners in the region and our international partners to bring hope where there is despair and, importantly, to end the conflict.

13. [900375] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Before the conflict, about 11% of the Syrian population were Christians. The Government rightly have a programme to admit refugees from the camps on humanitarian grounds, but in the early stages of the programme, many Christians would not go to the camps because of intimidation. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that, when the Government admit refugees for very good reasons, a fair proportion of them will be Christians?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are prioritising reaching the most vulnerable people across Syria, including Christians, and UK funding is distributed on the basis of ensuring that civilians are not discriminated against on the basis of race, religion or ethnicity.

UN Target: Aid

3. Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to continue to meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of GDP on aid to developing countries for the duration of this Parliament. [900365]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Meeting the 0.7% of GNI target for overseas aid is a manifesto commitment. It is enshrined in law, and the Government have been unequivocal that we will continue to honour that pledge.

Matt Rodda: As well as committing to the United Nations target of spending 0.7% of GDP on aid to developing countries, does the Secretary of State agree that poverty reduction must be at the heart of UK aid spending?

Priti Patel: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the House. He is absolutely right, and that is exactly what our aid spending does. Importantly, poverty reduction is at the heart of the definition in terms of official development assistance spending, and that is something that the Government are absolutely focused on.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The 0.7% is extremely valuable in alleviating poverty. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the important summit on family planning that she attended yesterday and tell us what it achieved?

Priti Patel: Family planning is an enormous issue for development and poverty alleviation. Yesterday, we convened a summit with our co-hosts, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and many representatives from around the world made big pledges and commitments to tackle family planning. The United Kingdom has led the way on the issue, but we are also working with the private sector to put more money into this area and to develop new commodities.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What percentage of the budget will be spent on helping developing countries to tackle climate change? Will the Secretary of State follow Scotland's example and establish a climate justice fund, or will the Government tie themselves to Donald Trump's attitude to climate change, which Professor Stephen Hawking recently described as pushing "the Earth over the brink, to become like Venus, with a temperature of 250 degrees, and raining sulphuric acid"?

Priti Patel: Let me be clear about this Government's commitment to climate change reduction. We are a signatory to the Paris agreement, which we are committed to delivering. As for the spending percentage, it is important to stress that we have a range of spending across Departments. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which leads on climate control and climate change, is working with DFID, because climate change issues such as drought and famine have a massive impact and cause a great deal of harm in various parts of the world.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Constituents from Chipping Barnet are coming to Parliament today to set out their concerns about Christians in Syria facing oppression and persecution. Will the Secretary of State use the aid budget to alleviate the suffering of Christian communities during their times of trouble?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and commend her and her constituents for the work that they are doing. UK aid and funding are distributed to those in need, including persecuted Christians around the world. Importantly, we are standing up for them and giving them a voice in parts of the world where conflict is happening.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): As well as recommitting to the UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid to developing countries, will the Secretary of State consult civil society before proposing any further changes to or relaxation of the rules on what ODA can be spent on?

Priti Patel: This is an important area and I have committed to working with all partners, particularly civil society. In fact, a range of NGOs and stakeholders spent some time with me two weeks ago, and we had a constructive discussion on that very issue. The dialogue is ongoing, and I would welcome the views of many other partners.

Kate Osamor: With the Government's new-found desire to reach out to other parties for new ideas, precisely which of the 13 policy ideas in Labour's 2017 manifesto does the Secretary of State now intend to implement?

Priti Patel: When it comes to development, it is fair to say that we agree on the national and global commitment to the 0.7% target, hence why we are having such a constructive exchange right now. In reference to the hon. Lady's previous question, we should be working collectively and with our international partners on ODA reform.

Famine and Food Shortages: Africa

4. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to support people affected by (a) famine in South Sudan and (b) food shortages in Somalia and Burundi. [900366]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): This year, we are providing a package of £276 million of humanitarian support to those countries, supplying food, shelter and water to those in desperate need.

David Linden: What is the Department doing to encourage the Ugandan Government to engage fully in diplomatic efforts to bring the warring parties in South Sudan around the negotiating table?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that issue. The conflict in South Sudan is abhorrent, and I saw that first hand on my visit earlier this year. I have been pressing the Ugandan Government and other neighbours in the region. They need to step up and call out the appalling behaviour that we have been seeing in South Sudan with President Salva Kiir. The United Kingdom is doing everything it possibly can to ensure that that message is being heard.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and DFID on co-ordinating the aid effort in South Sudan with other countries. Does she agree that that is yet another example of where British taxpayers' money is being wisely spent on keeping alive men, women and children who happen to share the same planet as us?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. South Sudan is a man-made crisis that has killed thousands and forced almost 4 million people to flee their homes. UK aid is not only saving lives but making an enormous difference in a country dominated by war and conflict.

Small Charities Funding

5. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps she is taking to enable small charities in the UK to access funding allocated by her Department. [900367]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Last week, DFID launched the small charities challenge fund, which is specifically for small UK-registered charities with an annual income of less than £250,000.

Mary Robinson: I am particularly proud of the work that many of my constituents in Cheadle undertake for small charities, which are vital to our aid programme, as highlighted by this funding. Does my right hon. Friend

agree that, by providing these funds to our local small charities, we can improve the connection between our civil society and the important work of helping countries overseas?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no doubt that small charities are a crucial part of the UK's development offer internationally. There are many extraordinary grassroots charities, and I urge all colleagues on both sides of the House to encourage their small charities to apply for this fund. There is a great opportunity to build links, both nationally and internationally, on these important issues.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give priority in allocating funds to areas of the world such as Yemen? There is a humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, where 300,000 people are facing a cholera epidemic.

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I commend him for again raising the issue of Yemen, where the conflict is having a devastating impact and, of course, there is a cholera crisis. The Government are spending hundreds of millions on providing necessary life-saving support to the people who are engulfed by that awful conflict.

12. [900374] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the remarkable voluntary charitable contribution made alongside the Government's work to relieve the crisis in Syria? How does the Department help to facilitate that work?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. UK aid is playing a significant part supporting Syria and the region—we are one of the largest donors—and many small charities are also involved. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has spoken about how UK charities are playing their part. The small charities challenge fund will help to facilitate more UK small charities to do more on international crisis and conflict.

Agenda 2030

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implementation of the Government's report, "Agenda 2030: Delivering the Global Goals", published in March 2017. [900368]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): As the hon. Lady knows, the UK was at the forefront of drafting those goals and is leading a great deal of the implementation. We published our report on 28 March. DFID leads on international implementation, and the Cabinet Office is ensuring that the single departmental plans drive it through domestically.

Kerry McCarthy: The Minister will know of my interest in food waste, which is addressed by sustainable development goal 12.3. Does he agree that it is not enough just to have a DFID-led approach? We will not be able to help farmers in developing countries unless we also tackle the relationship with supermarkets in this country.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Lady has been a leader in this House on addressing food waste, which fundamentally needs to be driven by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its Secretary of State, monitored by the Cabinet Office through the single departmental plan. DFID's role is then to ensure that, internationally, we are consistent by showing exactly the kind of leadership on food waste that the hon. Lady has provided.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I know that the commitment to implementing the sustainable development goals comes right from the top of Government. By when did my hon. Friend ask the Office for National Statistics to report on the UK's progress?

Rory Stewart: The Office for National Statistics is compiling a report for the UN, and we will be submitting ourselves to a voluntary assessment of the UK's performance on the sustainable development goals at home and abroad.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Briefly, Mr David Hanson.

15. [900377] **David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): Does not President Trump's declaration on the Paris agreement blow a hole in the UK's objectives on the climate change agreement as part of the millennium development goals?

Rory Stewart: The UK's obligation under the sustainable development goals is to remain committed to our own performance. We are sticking with the Paris agreement, and we will demonstrate at home and abroad that we really care about clean, renewable energy and the future of this planet.

Topical Questions

T1. [900378] **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Yesterday I hosted a fantastic family planning conference here in London, dealing with the population challenges of regions such as Africa, demonstrating UK leadership and UK aid in action, and helping those who do not have a voice on that essential issue.

Neil Gray: Will the Secretary of State commit to not changing the UK definition of international aid without consultation with and the approval of this House—yes or no?

Priti Patel: I have already said that I am engaging all parties, meaning not just political parties but stakeholders and international colleagues. We have very clear guidelines on OECD development assistance committee rules. We will work with all partners to make the necessary changes.

T2. [900379] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): If someone's tools or land are stolen and there is no redress through the justice system, or if someone is

fearful to walk to school because they have been raped and no action has been taken, development is restricted and poverty continues. What action is the Department for International Development taking to make sure that justice systems function properly in the developing world?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. Strengthening justice systems around the world, particularly in developing and poor countries, is an essential part not only of our fight to combat global poverty, but of building safer communities and countries. That is the focus of DFID and UK aid.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): What are the Secretary of State and her ministerial colleagues doing about the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who cannot access any UK aid because they are still under siege from the al-Assad Government?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman mentions the very serious situation in Syria and the besieged areas, where we and all other agencies are collectively struggling to get support and aid to people who desperately need it. We are working with many aid agencies on the ground and with the United Nations in particular, which is leading the way. The situation in Syria is devastating and we are working with everyone possible and all parties to see what we can do to get supplies in as and when windows of opportunity appear.

T3. [900380] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): Free trade is essential if poorer countries are to escape poverty. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the steps she is taking to address that issue?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK is committed to ensuring that developing countries can reduce and combat poverty by focusing on free trade and open markets. We are at the forefront of an economic development strategy and are encouraging trade preferences with poor countries to help to trade their way out of poverty. DFID is absolutely focused on that area.

Mr Speaker: Order. So that the whole House can benefit from the mellifluous tones of the right hon. Lady, perhaps she would be good enough to face the House in answering, and then we can always have a richly satisfying experience.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): School students from Wrexham and Leribe in Lesotho in southern Africa have had a tremendous relationship over 10 years as a result of personal contact between students in Europe and Africa. How are we going to enable that to continue?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise those amazing partnerships between schools in Africa and the United Kingdom. DFID is leading the way with many programmes, including the connecting classrooms programme in schools in the constituencies of many right hon. and hon. Members. We are absolutely encouraging more of that dialogue.

T4. [900381] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): Trade, not aid is the route out of poverty for developing countries. Does the Secretary of State agree that leaving the EU will allow this country to lower its tariffs, and developing countries to trade with us?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a very important and relevant point. As someone who also campaigned to leave the European Union, I think he is absolutely right. Our trade preferences, which will be introduced by future legislation as we leave the EU, will enable many poor countries to leave poverty behind and get on the path to prosperity through open markets and free trade.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): With 95% of its drinking water now unsafe to drink, Gaza is fast approaching the point of becoming uninhabitable, as predicted by the United Nations. What are the Government doing to ensure that we do not reach that point and to push the EU plans to fund a desalination plant there?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): According to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, most homes in Gaza are getting water for only a few hours every three to five days. The availability of safe drinking water has become worse. The UK is urging all parties to find a sustainable solution to the current situation, and in the longer term continues to urge the Israeli authorities to ensure fair distribution of water across the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

T5. [900382] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): Will the Secretary of State assure me that her Department will work closely with disability-focused organisations so that the UK's efforts to improve access to education for disabled children in developing countries are successful?

Priti Patel: I welcome my hon. Friend to the House and thank him for his question. We are committed to using UK aid to focus on disability in poor countries and, importantly, to enable disadvantaged people in some of the poorest parts of the world to access some of the innovation and great ways of working we have in the United Kingdom.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I recently went to Jordan, where we met people on the ground who are really worried about the potential instability resulting from Jordan's acceptance of so many Syrian refugees. Do the Government agree that ensuring stability in the host countries that are opening their doors is an absolute priority?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Like me, she will have seen at first hand the impact of Syrian conflict on Jordan and the region. As a host country, Jordan is being heavily supported by UK aid—the British taxpayer—to provide all the essentials.

T6. [900383] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State ensure that her Department works with Population Matters to make sure that more women in the developing world have access to advice and support for contraception and family planning?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that. Yesterday, we hosted a summit on that very issue. We will continue to lead the way and to be at the forefront of standing up for women's rights in developing countries, as well as pioneering more work on and support for family planning and contraceptives.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that recent proposals in Israel on the construction of a Gaza sea port, such as those advanced by the Israeli Labor Knesset Member Omer Barlev and discussed last month by the Israeli Cabinet, would offer a much-needed route to easing the situation in Gaza? Will he support that initiative?

Alistair Burt: Yes, a new sea port at Gaza could open up all sorts of things in Gaza and change the situation for the people there quite materially. It is an interesting proposal and I am of course interested to see how far it is taken.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call David “Top Cat” Davies.

T7. [900384] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. British-funded refugee camps throughout Turkey have been saving lives and preventing illegal migration into Europe. Is it now time to operate a similar scheme in north Africa?

Priti Patel: We are of course providing a great deal of support and humanitarian aid to migrants and refugees in north Africa. We are working across the Government on how to deal with migration routes: we are looking at the flows of people so that, when we need to, we can send them back to their home country.

Mr Speaker: I do not want the hon. Member for Havant (Alan Mak) to feel excluded.

T8. [900385] **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): The British Government are leading the response to the famine in east Africa. Will the Minister update the House on the Department’s work in this area?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to speak about east Africa, where there is one of the four famines that the world faces this year. In east Africa specifically, we have led the way in humanitarian and emergency food assistance and helped more than 2.4 million people.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900401] **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 12 July 2017.

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I have been asked to reply. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in attendance on Her Majesty the Queen, welcoming their Majesties King Felipe and Queen Letizia of Spain on their state visit to the United Kingdom. I am sure the whole House wishes them well.

Caroline Flint: Is today’s report that in 2015-16 National Grid made £3 billion of profit at the expense of households not further evidence that the Government are not delivering fair energy prices? Will the Government agree to an immediate rebate for overcharging, and will they now commit to an energy price cap for the 17 million households on the most expensive tariffs?

Damian Green: The right hon. Lady is right to identify the issue of energy prices, and I am sure she will welcome the announcement in the Queen’s Speech that the Government will

“ensure fairer markets for consumers”

and that

“this will include bringing forward measures to help tackle unfair practices in the energy market to help reduce energy bills.” I am sure this is an issue on which we can work across the House together.

Q2. [900402] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Mr Speaker, yesterday you kindly hosted two important talks on the future of health and social care, and their funding, including one by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). My right hon. Friend the First Secretary knows that the NHS in Staffordshire and Stoke is delivering fine care, but under great financial pressure, in common with other parts of the country. May I encourage the Government to bring together people from across this House to make this Parliament the one that puts the NHS and social care on a firm and sustainable foundation?

Damian Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. I know he has been campaigning vigorously on behalf of health services in his constituency, including his local hospital, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am sure we both welcome the fact that the Government have committed an extra £8 billion over this Parliament to the NHS, and we are also committed to having a full debate, across the House, and much more widely with people, about how we can improve our social care system, because this is indeed one of the big issues facing this country.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): First, let me welcome the First Secretary to his new role. By my reckoning, in the 20 years since he first joined this House he is the 16th Member to represent his party at Prime Minister’s questions, so how about I give him until the end of this session to be able to name all the others? In the meantime, I am sure he and the whole House will join me in congratulating Jo Konta and the British and Irish Lions on their historic achievements of recent days.

On British and Irish co-operation, the First Secretary has huge expertise on the practicalities of the common travel area, so can he tell the House: what will happen to the Irish land border if no deal is reached between Britain and Europe by the end of March 2019?

Damian Green: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks; I might take her up on her offer and try to name all 16 in the Tea Room later, rather than delay the House now. There are many, many distinguished people, of both sexes, who have done this in my party, because we of course elect women leaders

occasionally. I also absolutely share her view about the British and Irish Lions, although it strikes me as a particularly British thing to do to celebrate a drawn series quite as hard as we have—nevertheless, that is the way we do sport. I know you, Mr Speaker, will be very keen on following Jo Konta's progress through Wimbledon, and Andy Murray's. Let us hope we have two finalists over the weekend.

On the substantive question the right hon. Lady asked about the Irish border, she will know that it is the aim of this Government to make sure we get the best deal for Britain. As the Prime Minister set out in her Lancaster House speech, one of the key issues that we want to bring forward, and have brought forward at the start of the negotiations, is precisely the issue of the Irish border, because it is extremely important that we get that right, not just for our own citizens in Northern Ireland, but for the Irish Republic. I have already had meetings with my opposite number, the Tánaiste, on this and other matters.

Emily Thornberry: I mentioned at the outset that the right hon. Gentleman is the 16th Member to represent his party in Prime Minister's questions since 1997. Only three of those have been women and the last one before the current Prime Minister was 16 years ago. I believe we have had three women Labour MPs doing this job in the past two years alone.

Let me return to my question. My question was not: what deal do we hope to get? My question was: what happens if we get no deal at all? This is not some sinister nightmare dreamt up by remainers: it was the Prime Minister who first floated the idea of “no deal”; the Foreign Secretary who said it would be “perfectly okay”; and the Brexit Secretary who said we would be prepared to “walk away”. But, since the election, the Chancellor has said that that would be a “very, very bad outcome”; and a former Minister has told Sky News that “no deal is dead”. So will the First Secretary clear this up: are Ministers just making it up as they are going along or is it still the Government's clear policy that no deal is an option?

Damian Green: I recommend that the right hon. Lady read the Prime Minister's Lancaster House speech, as that is the basis on which we are negotiating. We are also saying that it is conceivable that we will be offered a kind of punishment deal that would be worse than no deal. That is not our intention; we want a deal and we want a good deal. May I also point out to her that it is the position of her leader and her party that, whatever is on offer, they will accept it? That is a terrible way to go into a negotiation. All that I can congratulate them on is their consistency. They have been consistently in favour of unilateral disarmament. They apply that not only to military matters, but to matters of negotiation on Britain's future prosperity.

Emily Thornberry: Apparently, the First Secretary of State did not get the Prime Minister's memo—you are supposed to be building consensus, man. If we ignore the political bluster, I think that what we heard was that no deal is indeed still an option. If that is the case, can we turn to what I might call the East India Club question? That was the question that the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) was trying to

ask before she suddenly turned herself into Nick Griffin. What does no deal actually mean for our businesses, for our people and for issues such as the Irish land border? Will the right hon. Gentleman address this question now: what does no deal look like in practice?

Damian Green: I am very happy to address the right hon. Lady's first point about consensus. As she knows, I am a moderate person who is keen on consensus. I very much look forward to sharing the Labour party's views this morning on the unemployment figures. Unemployment is now down to its lowest level since the early '70s. There are many Members of this House who were not born when unemployment was as low as this Government have made it. I would hope that, in the course of her questions, she can bring herself actually to welcome lower unemployment. On the substance of her question—as she knows—we are seeking a good deal for Britain that will enable us to trade as freely as possible with the European Union to protect our prosperity at the same time as getting trade deals with other important markets around the world. In the past week alone, both the United States and Australia have said that they would like to sign trade deals with Britain as fast as possible. I am happy to report to her that negotiations are going well and that her fear of no deal is probably overstated.

Emily Thornberry: If the First Secretary of State wants to talk about unemployment, let me ask him this: will he publish the Treasury's assessment of the impact that a no deal outcome would have on jobs and growth in Britain? Will he publish that today—I don't think so. Let us continue. If he will not tell the House—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady must be heard, and she will be, as will the First Secretary of State. Members must calm themselves.

Emily Thornberry: If the First Secretary of State will not tell the House what no deal means, can he at least clear up the confusion over whether a plan for no deal actually exists? Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary told me that, indeed, there was no plan for no deal. Two hours later, No. 10 fought back and said that there was a plan. *[Interruption.]* The Brexit Secretary might be laughing, but I am turning to him next. He was so busy fighting with himself that, on 12 March, he said that there was a plan. On 17 March, he said that there was not. On 19 May, he said that he spent half his time thinking about it. Yesterday, he said that he was not prepared to comment. Can the First Secretary of State clear up the confusion today: is there, or is there not, a contingency plan for no deal? If there is, will he undertake to publish it?

Damian Green: The right hon. Lady says that she is happy to talk about unemployment; I notice that she cannot bring herself to welcome falling unemployment figures. We will clearly have to try harder to establish consensus on what I would hope would genuinely unite both sides of the House.

On the issue of the report, the Office for Budget Responsibility is publishing its fiscal risks report tomorrow. If the right hon. Lady can be patient, she will see the report that she wants.

Emily Thornberry: So let us be clear: the First Secretary seems to be saying that no deal is still on the table, but he will not say what it means; and that there is a no deal contingency plan, but he is not going to publish it. This really is two steps forward and two steps back. After all, if the Government seriously want open, cross-party debate about the best way forward for Brexit, surely they have to spell out what all the options look like.

Can the First Secretary at least provide some clarity on one issue? Let us try to make some progress today. He has said repeatedly that we want to avoid a cliff edge Brexit, but under a no deal scenario, he knows that that must be impossible. The Prime Minister can hardly storm out of the negotiating room saying that she will not accept the deal, and then pop her head round the door again and ask can she have two more years to prepare. That is not how it works. Does the First Secretary accept that no deal also means no transitional arrangements?

Damian Green: Let me try even harder to establish consensus with the right hon. Lady. I think we both want a deal; I hope she will agree to that—that she wants a deal at the end of this. The reason why I am optimistic that, because of our negotiating stance and the position set out by the Prime Minister, we will get a deal, is that we have, for example, made a fair and realistic offer about citizenship to try to remove that problem from the equation.

That is a first indication of how we will approach these negotiations. We approach them in a positive state. We believe that it is in the interests of not just Great Britain but the other member states of the European Union to reach a deal with one of their biggest trading partners. It is in everyone's interests to reach this deal. Frankly, the right hon. Lady has so far said nothing constructive that might contribute to a deal, but I will give her another chance.

Emily Thornberry: I know the right hon. Gentleman is new to this, but the way the rules work—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not know whether this is spontaneous or orchestrated, and I do not really care which. But whichever it is, the idea that it is going to stop the right hon. Lady from asking her questions is for the birds. Members are wasting their vocal cords. We will carry on for as long as necessary to accommodate the Back-Bench Members whom I wish to accommodate.

Emily Thornberry: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is new to this, but the way it works is that he asks the—that I ask the questions—*[Interruption.]* We are quite happy to swap places with them. Frankly, if he does not want to continue under these rules, I am sure there are plenty of other people on the Front Bench there who would love the opportunity to audition as Prime Minister.

I do appreciate all the First Secretary's answers, but they just serve to illustrate what a mess the Government have got themselves into by threatening to walk away even before talks began. Is it not the truth that we have a no deal option on the table but the Government will not tell us what that means, and that they have contingency plans but they will not let the public see them? We have got a Chancellor demanding transitional

arrangements, which a no deal option makes impossible. We have got a Foreign Secretary making it up as he is going along. We have got a Brexit Secretary so used to overruling his colleagues that he has started overruling himself, and we have got a Prime Minister who is so bereft of ideas that she has started putting suggestion boxes around Parliament. But as a country we have 20 months to go until Brexit. We absolutely have to get a grip. If the Conservative party has not got the strength for the task, then we absolutely have to get rid of them.

Damian Green: There may have been a question in there somewhere. I assure the right hon. Lady of two things. This Government are already in the negotiations, as she will have seen. We have started the negotiations, and they are going well. We said that the first thing we wanted to do was to negotiate citizens' rights, and that was the first item on the agenda of the first meeting. We want to ensure that European citizens in this country and—equally importantly—British citizens living in other European countries, have as much certainty about their rights as soon as possible. That is what we are negotiating, and that is the sign of a practical and pragmatic Government getting on with work in the interests of the British people.

I have counted that the Labour party has so far had nine different plans on Europe. Labour Members want to be both in and out of the single market, and in and out of the customs union. They said that they wanted to remain, but they voted to enact article 50. They split their party on that. The right hon. Lady said that she would prefer to be at this Dispatch Box, rather than that one. I remind her of the other event that happened recently, where the Conservative party got more votes and more seats than the Labour party and won the election.

Q3. [900403] David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I do welcome the jobs that have been announced. Furthermore, after 65 years of people in my constituency talking about a link road, one actually opened on my watch. I am also trying to obtain an enterprise zone or business park, about which I had a productive meeting yesterday with the powerhouse Minister and the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, who I believe is here today. Would my right hon. Friend help, in any way possible, to ensure that this business park becomes a reality so that we can create more jobs in Morecambe and Lunesdale?

Damian Green: I agree with my hon. Friend. He will be interested to know that employment in the north-west of England has increased by 2.5% over the past year. Labour Members may wish to welcome that, rather than to heckle. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of business parks and enterprise zones as drivers of economic growth. I wish him well in his campaign, and I am sure that the Business Secretary will be happy to look into the matter.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure that the whole House will join me and my colleagues in marking the 22nd anniversary of the sad events at Srebrenica. I thank those who held last night's memorial in London to ensure that we never forget. Will the First

Secretary of State confirm that the devolved Administrations will not face a diminution of powers as a result of the repeal Bill?

Damian Green: I join the hon. Gentleman in commemorating the dreadful events at Srebrenica. I am happy to reconfirm what the Prime Minister and others have said—that there will be no diminution of the devolved Administrations' powers under the terms of the Brexit deal that we will negotiate, and that we will look to devolve more powers as a result of the process.

Ian Blackford: I thank the First Secretary of State for that answer. Will he confirm that there will be a cast-iron guarantee that all powers that come back into the United Kingdom on devolved matters will be returned? Furthermore, do the United Kingdom Government intend to amend schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 to change any aspect of the devolved competences that were approved in the 1997 Scottish referendum?

Damian Green: I can only keep repeating the assurances that we have already given. I am slightly surprised by the Scottish nationalists' approach. My understanding of their position is that they want the powers taken from London to Edinburgh so that they can give them back to Brussels. Perhaps their inability to explain the logic of that position might explain their recent general election result.

Q5. [900406] Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Earlier this year, the brilliant new St Luke's Hospital opened in my constituency, but the old cottage hospital that it replaced contains an important and unique war memorial. Does the First Secretary agree with me that, however the NHS redevelops that site, it is vital that the war memorial is preserved in a fitting way so that future generations can remember the sacrifices of those who came before us?

Damian Green: Perhaps particularly at the moment, when we are about to commemorate the centenary of the terrible battle at Passchendaele, it is very important that we consider the issue of war memorials. Memorials like the one my hon. Friend mentions call on us to remember the horrors of war and to honour the memories of those who died. In this case, I understand that the war memorial is protected by an Historic England grade II listing, so specific planning consent would be required to relocate the memorial as part of any future plans. I hope that will provide the protection he and his constituents need.

Q4. [900405] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent has serious mental ill health and has had over 50 separate admissions to psychiatric care. She requires regular monitoring to prevent her condition from worsening and becoming a danger to herself and others. She could access support under the disability living allowance, but she stands to lose £110 per week under the personal independence payment. As the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, will the First Secretary look urgently at this case and change the loophole in PIP that leaves very vulnerable people without the continual support that keeps them safe?

Damian Green: Obviously, the House will be concerned to hear about the case of the hon. Lady's constituent, as I am. The hon. Lady will know that one of the effects of the transition from DLA to PIP is that more people are now eligible for support—particularly those, as it happens, with mental health problems. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will have heard her point, and I have no doubt that if she contacts him, he will look into the case personally.

Q7. [900408] Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Some of the most distressing cases that I and other Members see in our constituency surgeries are those involving domestic violence. The Queen's Speech has promised a Bill to help to strengthen our confrontation of this problem, so will the Deputy Prime Minister—sorry, the First Secretary—tell us when we can expect this legislation, urgently needed as it is, and what the Government are doing about this problem while we await it?

Damian Green: I agree that this is a hugely important issue, and my hon. Friend is right that we have committed in the Queen's Speech to introduce a domestic abuse Bill in this Session, which I hope will be a landmark in this important area. What we want to do in the Bill is set in motion a transformation not just to protect and support victims, but to recognise the lifelong impact domestic abuse can have on children and to make sure that the agencies respond effectively to domestic abuse. We will, of course, be consulting all the relevant professions and voluntary groups on this, but we are absolutely determined to press ahead with this very important legislation.

Q6. [900407] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Little Max Johnson is nine. He is in hospital, and he is urgently waiting for a heart transplant. His mum, Emma, and his brother, Harry, join us today to support Max, but also the 10,000 people around the country who need an organ transplant. We can do more to help them. Wales has already moved to the opt-out system, and Scotland plans to do the same. Does the First Secretary agree with me that, in England, we should change the law to one of presumed consent for organ donation, to give Max and all those other people the best chance of life?

Damian Green: I am sure that the thoughts of Members across the House are with Max and his family at this incredibly difficult time. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that organ donation is clearly a hugely important part of our system, and I am pleased that there are now more than 23 million people on the organ donor register. Over the past year, we saw the highest ever donor and transplant rates in the UK, but, of course, there is more that can be done. As the hon. Gentleman says, the law is different in other territories inside the UK, and the Department of Health is looking at the impact of those changes to see if they can give rise to further improvements in the number of available organs.

Q8. [900409] Mr Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the quarterly economic survey of the Greater Manchester chamber of commerce predicts economic growth at 3.25% annually, which it has been, broadly, since 2013? Is he further aware that Manchester airport is planning

a £1 billion investment in the coming years? Does that not indicate a welcome rebalancing of the economy, underpinned by sound economic management? Will he undertake to continue that sound economic management, which is so necessary to our country?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend has made a number of important points, particularly about Manchester airport, which I know has been a significant driver of the excellent growth figures of the increasingly excellent economy of Manchester and the surrounding areas. Everything that he has said is true, and I think it is a tribute to the work that has been done on the northern powerhouse that we are now spreading that prosperity across the north of England.

Q9. [900410] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The First Secretary said the other day that we needed a national debate on tuition fees, and admitted that student debt was “a huge issue”. Given that the Prime Minister is touting for ideas, may I recommend page 43 of our manifesto, and ask the Government to adopt Labour’s pledge to abolish tuition fees—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not remember the contents of page 43, so I would quite like to hear this.

Dr Huq: May I suggest that the Government consult page 43 of our manifesto, and commit themselves to Labour’s policy of abolishing tuition fees?

Damian Green: People often stand at this Dispatch Box and say, “I am pleased that the hon. Lady raised that question.” I am genuinely pleased that the hon. Lady raised that question, because it allows me to draw attention to the very slight problem with her argument, which is that her own party’s Education spokesman has admitted that the tuition fees policy has a £100 billion—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has admitted that there is a £100 billion black hole in Labour’s student fees policy. That is nearly as much money as we spend on the NHS in a year, and it is equivalent to two years’ worth of disability benefits.

The Labour party was particularly incredible on this issue at the general election, and I am astonished that Labour Members now want to bring it up at Prime Minister’s Question Time. I remind them that misleading students and young people is a very dangerous thing to do. If they do not believe me, they can ask the Liberal Democrats.

Q10. [900411] Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Just one in five of our public art sculptures and statues is of a woman. Next week, to mark 200 years since the death of the world-renowned novelist Jane Austen, the first ever sculpture of her will be unveiled in my constituency, the borough of her birth in the county that inspired her. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling for more areas to do what Basingstoke has done, and celebrate their famous daughters?

Damian Green: I am delighted to echo my right hon. Friend’s call for a welcome for the new statue of Jane Austen in Basingstoke. I am genuinely astonished that there is not a statue of Jane Austen anywhere else in the

country, given that she is one of our greatest authors and is still popular 200 years after her birth. I am also happy to echo my right hon. Friend’s desire for more statues of Britain’s greatest women to be spread around the country.

Q12. [900413] Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Politicians are said to be here today and gone tomorrow, but whatever tomorrow may bring, the Prime Minister is not even here today to mark the end of her first year in power. I also note that, for the first time since she became Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* Listen: you might like to hear this. For the first time since she became Prime Minister, her image has been removed from the front page of the Conservative party website. Can the First Secretary tell us why she has gone from being the next iron lady to “The Lady Vanishes”?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman is ingenious in asking very personal questions, and I commend him for it. Unfortunately, he has his own record on this subject. As recently as June last year, he said that the leader of the Labour party was “not destined to become Prime Minister”, and called on him to resign. I suggest that he might want to make peace with his own Front Benchers before starting to be rude about ours.

Q11. [900412] Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Today’s jobs figures show that we have the highest employment rate since comparable records began. We have more people in full-time employment, and we are touching on the lowest youth unemployment since records began. In the light of the Matthew Taylor review of modern working practices, what more can be done to ensure that that record continues, and that we continue to rid the country of the scourge of long-term youth unemployment?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is exactly right, specifically on the subject of youth unemployment. One of the particularly welcome figures among the consistently low and falling unemployment figures over which this Government have presided is the fact that youth unemployment is now at historically low levels and lower than in many other comparable economies. We will continue this in this Parliament, not just with our moves on more apprenticeships, but with the introduction of new and better technical and vocational education, which is key to providing long-term prosperity not just for the economy as a whole, but for everyone in this country.

Q14. [900415] Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): How can the Government continue to justify not providing fair and equitable funding arrangements for West Lancashire to support water level management organisations, otherwise known as drainage boards, to help protect homes and the agriculture and horticulture industries critical to the local economy, instead of causing the Environment Agency to threaten to turn off the Alt Crossens pumping station?

Damian Green: The hon. Lady raises a reasonable point about the Environment Agency. It is the Environment Agency’s duty to ensure that water supplies are good and safe. If she wishes to bring up this issue with my

right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I am sure he will be happy to talk to her about it.

Q13. [900414] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Zero-energy bill homes at below market prices are being built by British architect Bill Dunster, with the support of the Building Research Establishment. Given their potential to help people find affordable housing, what more can the Government do to help expand this type of housing as part of our commitment to both enterprise and social justice?

Damian Green: I know that my hon. Friend is an energetic campaigner for social justice. This is a very good example of how having a dynamic and flexible economy is not just good for the economy, but actually good for the whole of society. I am happy to join him in welcoming this type of innovation. Bill Dunster's firm is a good example of such innovation. I know that it has been supported by the Government's enterprise investment scheme, so the Government are doing their best to support this type of measure. We are stimulating the growth of the off-site construction sector, which enables more houses to be built, through our accelerated construction programme and the home building fund. This is another very important issue to make sure that we spread the benefits of prosperity around this country.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I wonder if the First Secretary of State might imagine what it feels like to be a parent forced to uproot their children from their one settled home to flee war and persecution, as millions of refugees around the world have done. Then would he imagine further how it might feel for those who become separated from their family members—with one family member making it, for instance, to the United Kingdom—when they are needlessly kept apart from their families due to cruel and unnecessary barriers to family reunification? Will the Government today endorse Baroness Hamwee's Bill in the other place to bring those desperate families back together?

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. He will be aware that this Government, and this country, have done a huge amount—particularly in the region, but also here at home—to help refugees from countries such as Syria. We have expanded the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, so we make sure our doors continue to remain open to people who most need our help. In particular, we work very closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to identify and refer the most vulnerable refugees. That is the most sensible humanitarian way we can help these very desperate people.

Since I assume this was the hon. Gentleman's last question, I suspect, as the leader of his party, may I wish him a fond farewell from that job? I am delighted that the Liberal Democrats have taken so seriously the Government's fuller working lives strategy, which is about providing more jobs for older workers, and that they are about to skip a generation in their leadership.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): At the recent G20 meetings, the Prime Minister had excellent and constructive trade discussions with the leaders of India, China, Japan and America, which collectively represent 43% of the world's population

and six times the population of the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that this demonstrates the potential for a prosperous and positive future for Britain post-Brexit, and that it really is time for the pessimists to look at the cup being half full rather than half empty?

Damian Green: I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend's approach and emphasise to him and the House that it is really important to do both—we need a good trade deal with the European Union, which is still a hugely important trading partner for us, but we also need to take the opportunity to strike trade deals with economies around the world, not just currently advanced economies but those that are growing very fast. That is the route to future global prosperity for this country.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): We have had two general elections where the Government have promised investment in the northern powerhouse, and yet again, within weeks, they have U-turned on the Trans-Pennine electrification. Is the £1 billion deal with the DUP to keep the Prime Minister in power being funded at the expense of investment in Bradford and the north?

Damian Green: No, not at all. The money that has gone for infrastructure in Northern Ireland is richly needed there. For example, we have signed city deals in England, Scotland and Wales, but none yet in Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady is right about the importance of the northern powerhouse, and we will continue with that programme, which is hugely important. As she has already heard, we are seeing unemployment falling consistently in the north of England as a sign of how the economy there is going as well as anywhere else in the country. We are determined to continue that.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I know that the First Secretary will be delighted to see that Parliament Square is now displaying the flag of every British overseas territory to welcome the King of Spain this week, including the flag of Gibraltar. Will he ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to remind the King of Spain that Gibraltar is British and that its sovereignty will remain paramount?

Damian Green: I am happy to assure my hon. Friend that the Government's position on Gibraltar is that the primacy of the wishes of its inhabitants, which are overwhelmingly to stay British, will be respected.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the effect on radiotherapy for cancer patients of their decision to withdraw from Euratom, given that the Royal College of Radiologists said this week that half a million scans a year are done using imported radioisotopes and that thousands of patients could be affected by this decision?

Damian Green: I am again genuinely happy to answer this question, because this is a very important issue and there has been some unnecessary worry caused to cancer patients by speculation on it. Let me set out the position.

The import or export of medical radioisotopes is not subject to any particular Euratom licensing requirements. Euratom places no restrictions on the export of medical

isotopes to countries outside the EU, so after we leave Euratom our ability to access medical isotopes produced in Europe will not be affected. I hope that clears the matter up and reassures cancer patients around the country that the scaremongering that is going on is unnecessary.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is a hopeful try by the hon. Lady, but points of order will come after the statement.

When the hon. Members for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) have resumed their seats—ah, I see that the latter has forged a new alliance with members of the Scottish National party; I am not sure which of them should be more afraid—we will proceed with the statement.

Humanitarian Situation in Mosul

12.44 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on my Department's continued support for the people of Mosul.

On Monday, Prime Minister Abadi declared Mosul to be liberated, three years after the city fell to Daesh. Victory comes after three years of unimaginable oppression by Daesh—three years of fear, executions, abductions, forced marriages and the destruction of Iraq's ancient heritage. It comes after nine months of heavy fighting by the Iraqi security forces, who faced brutal Daesh tactics, including the use of human shields and suicide bombers. My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary will provide the House with a more detailed update tomorrow on the ongoing military campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and the UK's role in this effort.

The declaration that Mosul is once again free is a great victory for the people of Iraq and a great stride forward for global security. I am sure that the House will join me in commending the extraordinary bravery of the Iraqi security forces, who have put the protection of civilians at the heart of their military campaign, acting to reduce civilian casualties wherever they could and risking their lives to help to evacuate civilians fleeing the bullets of Daesh fighters. We should recognise their professionalism, courage and significant sacrifice. They have been backed up from the air by the international coalition forces, including the RAF, who have taken all reasonable precautions during the planning and execution of airstrikes to reduce the risk to civilian life.

We should also recognise the bravery of the people of Mosul: children who have been out of school for years are now back in the classroom and sitting exams; doctors who had to stop working under Daesh are once again giving life-saving treatment to their fellow citizens who were injured in the fighting; and volunteers are clearing the rubble from the streets and public buildings.

However, we must be realistic about the challenges ahead. Almost 50,000 homes have been destroyed and although 200,000 people have returned to their homes in eastern Mosul, over 700,000 people are still displaced and in need of continued humanitarian assistance. Explosive remnants of this war will be a problem for many months to come.

After winning the battle for Mosul, it is important to win the peace, and now starts the painstaking task of rebuilding and reconciling so that families can return home as quickly as possible, communities can live peacefully alongside one another once more, and citizens can start to rebuild their lives. Needs in and around Mosul will not fall immediately, even as the fighting ends.

As a global humanitarian leader, the United Kingdom has been at the forefront of efforts to support the humanitarian response and will continue to stand alongside the people of Iraq in the months ahead. From the very start of the Mosul military operations, the UK has provided shelter, medical care and food to those who have either lost their homes because of the fighting or been forced to flee for safety reasons.

The UK is the largest donor to the Iraq humanitarian pooled fund and we are providing practical, life-saving support, including water in camps for over 166,000 displaced

people, cash assistance to over 50,000 vulnerable people, and life-saving healthcare, including a trauma hospital to treat the victims of the fight against Daesh.

Today I am pleased to confirm that the UK will provide £40 million of humanitarian funding this year, taking our total commitment just in Iraq since 2014 to £209 million. This funding will help to ensure that displaced communities and people will receive much-needed shelter, food and medical support, and it will also provide protection services for the most vulnerable, including minorities, women and girls. Already, £18 million of this funding has been allocated to partners who are working hard to deliver assistance around Mosul.

The United Nations has set funding requirements for Iraq in 2017 at \$984 million. The UK is stepping up, and I continue to call on my colleagues in the international development community—the donors—to follow Britain's lead. The international community must continue to support the people of Mosul and Iraq.

As people return home to liberated areas, they will need support to rebuild their lives. Humanitarian and stabilisation partners are helping to re-establish basic services, including by distributing food in areas where markets are not yet functioning and providing cash assistance so that vulnerable people can buy what they most need.

In east Mosul, the Department for International Development's humanitarian funding to the International Organisation for Migration and UNICEF has already helped to reopen health facilities and provide clean water in liberated areas, which is essential for people to be able to return home. DFID will also provide £6 million this year for stabilisation efforts. That funding will help to restore basic services and infrastructure in liberated areas, including in Mosul. Through the United Nations Development Programme, UK funding has already helped to rehabilitate the al-Qasour water plant in eastern Mosul. Over 750 schools have already reopened, allowing 300,000 children to sit exams. Our funding will also support local reconciliation, helping displaced people to reintegrate back into their communities when they return home. Across Iraq, over 1 million people have returned to their homes in areas where UK-funded stabilisation projects are working.

But ultimately, to win the peace in Iraq, the Government of Iraq will need to unite all Iraqis against extremism, address the grievances that led to Daesh's rise and persuade all Iraqi communities that they have a fair stake in their nation's future. The UK will continue to be steadfast in our support for the Government of Iraq's efforts to drive forward reform, reconciliation and stabilisation.

This week's victory against Daesh in Mosul marks an important moment in the campaign to defeat this terror group and its poisonous ideology. We join our Iraqi friends in celebrating the liberation of this historic city. The UK will continue to provide much-needed humanitarian and stabilisation assistance to those who have been affected by the conflict, and to support the Government of Iraq's efforts to build a stable, secure and prosperous Iraq. I commend this statement to the House.

12.51 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and I particularly welcome the news of Mosul's liberation after three

[*Kate Osamor*]

years of oppression. It is important to defeat Daesh's violent ideology wherever it emerges. I would like to pay tribute to the Iraqi security forces and the people of Mosul, who have shown remarkable courage in the face of Daesh's continued oppression. I pay particular tribute to the role of the UK Government in their important work to provide critical aid and emergency support. The UK's continued role in the coming days and weeks, and the significant funding commitments announced by the Secretary of State, which I welcome, will save lives and help to rebuild Mosul. This commitment also demonstrates the important role that UK aid plays not only in standing alongside the people of Iraq, but in contributing to long-term peace and stability.

I would like to ask the Secretary of State a series of questions about her announcement. First, although there is cause for real celebration in the liberation of Mosul, Amnesty International has identified countless human rights violations on all sides—both by Daesh and, possibly, by the Iraqi forces—in the fight for Mosul. These include the use of civilians as human shields by Daesh fighters and violations of children's rights. Amnesty International has called for a thorough investigation of all human rights violations and possible war crimes carried out during the liberation of Mosul, and the UN human rights chief has called for a strong culture of accountability now that the city has been liberated. Does the Secretary of State support those calls and will she tell us how we can help?

Secondly, while I welcome the UK Government's aid response to the situation in Mosul, the forced displacement of numerous refugees in and around Mosul as a result of the past two years of Daesh occupation requires widespread action, not only on rebuilding, but on the resettlement of those displaced. Will the Secretary of State update us on how we will be able to help all those who have been displaced? I thank the Secretary of State again for her welcome statement to the House.

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her generous comments and support for what has been achieved in Mosul. I absolutely agree that we should pay tribute to all the forces involved, and also to the people of Mosul, who have suffered considerably at the hands of Daesh.

The hon. Lady is right to point to Amnesty International's report today, which makes allegations and raises concerns about the coalition—well, Iraqi—forces and human rights violations. It is important to stress that the security forces and the coalition have made every effort to protect civilians during operations. Now that we are hearing of alleged violations or abuses, it is quite right that they are thoroughly and transparently investigated, and those found responsible must be held to account. We also welcome the previous statement by Prime Minister Abadi on this and encourage reporting on the outcomes.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of the displacement of people. Hundreds of thousands of people have been affected by what has happened in Mosul and in Iraq more broadly. The focus now has to be on resettlement and the reunification of the country as a whole.

The hon. Lady will have heard me speak briefly about the stabilisation efforts which, of course, have to be the focus right now. UK aid, and my Department in particular,

are working with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, others across Government and the international community not only to support UN stabilisation efforts in Iraq and secure the liberated areas, clearing areas of explosives and making them habitable again, but, importantly, to provide the basics to people by putting in water facilities, power networks, clinics and schools. We also know that 1.8 million people have been displaced in Iraq since 2015 and have returned to their homes when possible, so it is important to focus on resettlement and stabilisation, and how we can bring prosperity and stability back to Mosul and the outlying areas of Iraq.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Mosul was home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the region, but religious minorities suffered dreadfully at the hands of ISIS. What can DFID do to ensure that such minorities are able to return to their place of origin?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question and for once again raising the issue of minorities who have been persecuted and displaced in the conflict. We know that what has happened, particularly for Christian communities and others, has been absolutely abhorrent. We are now focused on stabilisation, and also on ensuring that Iraq as a whole can be rebuilt and reunified so that all communities can come back to their homes and feel that they can contribute to a new Iraq following the conflict.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We very much welcome the military defeat of Daesh in Mosul, but for the victory to be truly complete, it is imperative that we address the now critical humanitarian needs of the people of the city and the surrounding region. As we have already heard, Amnesty International has described the horrors that the people of Mosul have witnessed and the disregard for human life by all parties to the conflict. That must not go unpunished. Entire families have been wiped out, many of whom are still buried under the rubble today. The people of Mosul deserve to know that there will be justice and reparation so that the harrowing impact of this operation is fully addressed.

The UK Government must finally learn the lessons from Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. It cannot be allowed to happen in Mosul, as it has happened in so many places before, that the cost and impact of UK military action dwarfs the relief and reconstruction efforts that follow. How are the Government working with civil society on the ground to alleviate the suffering of those in the refugee camps who lack sufficient food, water and electricity to survive the scorching desert heat? Will the Government support the creation of an independent commission, as recommended by Amnesty International, to investigate the killings of civilians by all sides in the conflict, including by air strikes carried out by the UK?

Priti Patel: I reiterate the comments I made to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) about the Amnesty International report, the violations that may have taken place and the need for investigations. It is right and proper that all attention is given to the investigations and that people are brought to justice in the right way, but we must also recognise that there have been horrific attacks across the whole of Iraq because

of the poisonous ideology of Daesh. The conduct of Daesh, the displacement of people and the atrocities that have taken place are absolutely unforgiveable and will no doubt scar generations to come.

It is important to stress at this time when many have worked to liberate Mosul, in particular coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces, that our priority is to continue the humanitarian support we provide through UK aid to the displaced and to support the stabilisation efforts. Of course that is the focus of not just the British Government but all our international partners, including the United Nations. We will continue to stand up for those who have been displaced and work collectively to bring peace and stability to Iraq.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the tone of the Secretary of State's announcement, and in particular the extra funds the UK is giving to the wonderful people in Mosul. However, she will know that if the experience of Fallujah and elsewhere is to be followed in Mosul, the vicious tactics of Daesh will mean that every single house, street and public place will be booby-trapped and mined, and it will take many years to clear that. Will she therefore commit the Government to doing what we can to help on the technical matter of removing the explosives? Secondly, it is not the scorching heat of today that we should be worrying about; it is the cold of the Mosul winter, which will come in only three or four months' time, by which point we must have found decent accommodation for these people.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I referred to the fact that we will spend a great deal of time, resources and effort in rebuilding not only Mosul but Iraq as a whole through the stabilisation approach that we will put forward. But there is no doubt that we will have to invest to reclaim land, and particularly to de-mine huge swathes of the country. The British Government announced earlier this year a substantial commitment to our de-mining efforts in countries that have been unstable through conflict.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that the weather conditions in Mosul will change in the latter part of the year—they will become much harsher—so all of us in the international community will have to not just step up our efforts, but focus our resources on those who will be in need in the harsh winter to come. Importantly, we need to rebuild, put houses in and start building infrastructure sooner rather than later.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and particularly welcome the additional humanitarian assistance she has announced and what she has just said about de-mining. When the people of Mosul do return, many will be deeply traumatised. What will the Government do to ensure there is the mental healthcare and support for those families when they do return?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to speak about the psychological, mental and physical trauma involved in recovering and rebuilding after what has happened across Iraq, and in Mosul in particular. I spoke about the fact that we will obviously need to rehabilitate the country at every single level—infrastructure,

water, schools and health centres. It is also vital that we work with our colleagues and counterparts internationally and in the health community to ensure that the medical assistance, support and expertise of those who can give the necessary help to those who need it is provided.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The people who wish to return to Mosul have been traumatised, as we have heard from many Members, but while the ones who stayed in the area want to go home, there are very few homes to go to. What exactly is this country doing to help to rebuild the infrastructure and put a roof over people's heads? Is the Secretary of State also encouraging other countries to support the people of the area?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the immediate needs of the more than 1.8 million displaced people in Iraq who have returned to their homes. We are working with the Iraqi Government on stabilisation, as well as with UN stability programmes in the areas where they are working to provide necessary infrastructure—renovated water facilities, power networks, clinics, schools, and also homes. The destruction that has taken place is incomprehensible to us. Vast swathes of land and homes were deliberately destroyed by Daesh, and it is our responsibility through UK aid, and working internationally with our partners, to ensure that we rebuild and rehouse the many millions who have been displaced.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I welcome the statement and thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of it. Tens of thousands of children have been without education in Mosul for many years, so it is good news that 750 schools have reopened, but what work is being done to assist schools to tackle the very particular and sensitive challenge of helping older children, teenagers and young adults to plug the significant gap in their education and prevent there being a lost generation?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to speak about the lost generation. There is a high level of displacement, including a horrifically high number of displaced children, across the whole region affected by conflict—Syria and Iraq. Many children have lost their education; they have been out of school for several years because of the extent of the conflict. The hon. Lady knows that the United Kingdom is an enormous supporter and big funder of the Education Cannot Wait programme, which focuses on exactly this in areas of conflict, as well as host communities—Jordan and Lebanon, for instance. We are providing resources to introduce a double-shift system of education. She also mentioned older children, and it is important, with the funding we put in through the partners with which we work, and particularly through Governments directly, that organisations provide education—they are—as well as technical and vocational training opportunities.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) *rose*—

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, a competition between cream-suited colleagues. I call Mr John Baron.

Mr Baron: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) is obviously a man of taste.

The Government have previously acknowledged that the cutting of the food coupon in the Syrian refugee camps in the summer of 2013 led to the mass exodus thereafter. While acknowledging the UK's proud track record on humanitarian aid, will my right hon. Friend make it clear to the House that the international community must step up to the plate on the funding of any temporary arrangements with regard to displaced people, and that we must learn those lessons?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. On lessons learned, effectively it is now about the implementation of a lot of the programmes for those in humanitarian crisis situations, in terms of food provision, water and other essentials. We have learned many lessons through the Grand Bargain work; partner organisations on the ground delivering services and provisions are working collectively, in a way that they were not in 2013, to bring vital aid and food to those who need it.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on her measured and comprehensive statement. I have a friend in Baghdad who was an MP in Mosul and who was also Culture Secretary; for her, the devastation of this historically very important city will have been awful, but I am glad that the Secretary of State is focusing on the humanitarian needs right away, because as Members have said, the traumatisation, particularly of children, in the area needs to be addressed immediately.

The Secretary of State talked about the importance of peace. Of course, we all want to see peace in the region, and I congratulate the Prime Minister of Iraq on hopefully getting rid of Daesh, at least from Mosul, but Kurdistan is a very important part of the country; does the Secretary of State agree that it is important that the Parliament of Kurdistan, which has not met for over a year, should meet as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her thoughtful observations on how we need to work together to bring peace and stability to Iraq and the region. This is not something that one country can do on its own; the international community can provide guidance, support and, in particular, assistance with getting the democracy functioning again. That would be the ultimate symbol of beating Daesh and the poisonous ideology that it has been propagating across the region. She is right to highlight the fact that stabilisation, peace and, ultimately, a functioning democracy should return all over again. This is a long-term objective, and we know that it will be difficult because of the levels of conflict, instability, destruction and displacement that we have seen. Our immediate focus is on putting people, including children, first and rebuilding the country in the best way we can through the international coalition.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to feel left out: I call Mr Alec Shelbrooke.

Alec Shelbrooke: In all my elections, I have proudly stood in support of our manifesto commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international aid, although

many people have criticised it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in situations such as these, such a commitment is not only morally right but enables us to invest in Iraq? A lot of the situation with Daesh in Mosul came about because the residents were worried about divisions in the Baghdad Government. It is investment from this country through my right hon. Friend's Department that allows people to be educated and ensures that that Government will work for the entire country to prevent this happening again.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for re-stating the importance of UK aid and our commitment to the world's poorest through the 0.7%. We have been undertaking urgent humanitarian support for a number of years, but we are also looking ahead to the stabilisation that we will work to achieve collectively within the international development community. We can see UK aid making a difference to people, and bringing peace, stability and global influence to countries such as Iraq in the way that we would all expect our aid budget to do.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Following the comments from the Scottish nationalist spokesman, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), does the Secretary of State agree that the crucial difference between the actions of the British and coalition forces on the one hand and Daesh on the other is that we go out of our way to minimise civilian casualties, while Daesh does exactly the opposite? At a time when one of our colleagues is being hideously bullied and threatened over her vote in favour of the action against Daesh, do we not need to send a clear message that this House was absolutely right to take the decisions to carry out military action against Daesh, both in Iraq and in Syria?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we did the right thing, and we will continue to do the right thing by standing up to those poisonous ideologies and the conduct of those awful groups around the world. The liberation of Mosul speaks volumes about the sacrifices that the people in that community—and those who fought against Daesh—have made.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Sexual violence is one of the consistent horrors of war, both conventional and unconventional. It is a deliberate act, and a recognisable but repugnant tactic designed to shatter the cohesion of oppressed people, as well as being a grotesque example of individual human rights abuses. Will the Secretary of State assure us that she will look at what DFID can do to mitigate this vile form of violence and to support the Yazidis and other fragile, damaged communities? Moreover, will she tell us what DfID can do to deter would-be oppressors from using this form of violence in future conflicts?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the abhorrent sexual violence against women and girls, particularly in the Yazidi community. He is also right to highlight the fact that Britain has been calling this behaviour out, and standing up for and giving a voice to many people who have been subjected to horrific abuses and attacks by Daesh. In countries of conflict, it is women and girls who suffer such atrocities

and acts of violence, and we will continue to stand up for them through our work with the United Nations and with our partners in other countries. In answer to his question on what else we can do, we will follow through the prosecutions of those who are responsible and hold them to account.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I visited the outskirts of Mosul last October during the conflict and met counter-terrorism personnel. I also visited six camps for refugees and internally displaced people and saw the huge humanitarian operation, which I was very impressed by. I note that on Radio 4's "Today" programme this morning, the deputy commander of the coalition forces, General Jones from the United Kingdom, said that everything had been done to protect citizens. However, he went on to describe Amnesty's report as "naive" and reckless. This is in the week in which the Amnesty report on Saudi Arabia arms sales—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are all very interested in the contents of the Amnesty report, but there is no need for a verbatim regurgitation of its contents. I just point out that so far, progress has been lamentably slow. That is not just the fault of the hon. Gentleman; it applies much more widely. We have got through only about 10 Back-Bench questions in 15 minutes, but I am sure that he is reaching his peroration, which we eagerly anticipate.

Graham Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was going to say that we need a new democratic settlement in Nineveh province. What are the Secretary of State's Department, the Foreign Office and our ambassador, Frank Baker, doing to ensure that we include minorities in that settlement?

Priti Patel: The Iraqi and coalition forces have made every effort to protect civilians. On the hon. Gentleman's last point, we are working with the Iraqi Government and with all partners on the ground on stabilisation and support for the rebuilding of Mosul.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy); he can be the author of the brevity textbook.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I pay tribute to the Iraqi security forces and the British armed forces for their work. Will the Secretary of State update us on another humanitarian threat to the people of Mosul, namely the Mosul dam, which is in an incredibly dangerous condition and, being upstream of Mosul, threatens the city?

Priti Patel: That is a very serious situation and, again, we are working on stabilisation and are making every effort to provide the support required in that area. We will continue to do that; this is an ongoing situation. We are not only monitoring it but are being very active in the support that we can give.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Last November, I raised the plight of the thousands of Yazidi women and children who were being held in

slavery by Daesh in Mosul. I asked the Government whether they would seek to provide specialist psychological care once the liberation of Mosul had been completed. Will the Minister tell me what plans the Government are putting in place, now that Daesh has been driven from the city, to tend to the specific psychological needs and physical wounds of one of the most wickedly abused communities on this planet?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the awful abuse of minorities, and of the Yazidi women in particular. I refer him to my earlier comment about the medical support we are providing. Mental and psychological support are absolutely essential, given the abhorrent nature of this conflict.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the resources that the Government are making available for the relief of the suffering following the conflict, but will the Secretary of State ensure that the international community at no stage loses focus on the politics of the settlement around Mosul? We must ensure that there is no continuation of the institutionalised marginalisation of the complex number of communities around the city, and that they all have a stake in the future.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the political stabilisation and about inclusivity in relation to the rebuilding. We will continue to work with Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraqi Government to ensure that this happens.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The tributes that the Secretary of State has made were right, and the ambition is commendable, but the question is: how is this going to be achieved? People talk facilely about learning the lessons from Iraq, but is it not an example of the collective failure to reconstruct the country that many Sunni families saw Daesh as their protectors against the legitimate Government, rather than the marauding killers that they were? How will things be different, and what role will the UK Government play?

Priti Patel: The UK Government will play their part in every way that is necessary. There are no easy solutions to rebuilding a country or to making it operationally functional again after such an abhorrent and appalling conflict. We will continue to support Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraqi Government and to aid in the response that is required. We will also support inclusivity and getting the politics, security and stabilisation right.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that reconstruction depends on the removal of mines and booby traps? Is she satisfied that there is adequate capacity, and that enough money has been allocated to deal speedily with that task? Is there any timetable?

Priti Patel: We provide support for the vital de-mining and clearing up of improvised explosive devices. The British Government have provided specific resources, and we will use various Government funds and support the UN Mine Action Service. However, the task is not easy, and the level of destruction in Iraq is absolutely

[Priti Patel]

atrocious. Our work is cut out for us, but we will give all the necessary support to ensure that mines are cleared and that land is returned to its former use.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The liberation of Mosul is a significant step towards the defeat of this evil terror, but does the Secretary of State agree that the rebuilding and de-radicalisation of communities are just as important as that defeat?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right that de-radicalisation must be a feature of the stabilisation and rebuilding. Divided and fractured communities need to be brought back together. Once again, Britain will lead the way on this, providing all the necessary support to the Iraqi Government and doing our bit to bring stability and peace to the country.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The atrocities of Daesh have failed to deliver a caliph and the so-called caliphate. My right hon. Friend rightly recognises the role of the Iraqi forces, but will she join me in recognising the role played by the Yazidi fighters, especially the female fighters? What work is being done to ensure that their voices are heard during the reconstruction?

Priti Patel: Taking back control of Mosul has been a hard-fought battle, and all the forces and communities should be commended for their efforts. Stabilisation obviously needs to happen, but the focus must be on bringing together the minority groups from all the communities that have been divided by this atrocious conflict.

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I join the right hon. Lady in paying tribute to our brave servicemen and women. I welcome her announcement about UK humanitarian aid, but what specific funding will be offered to women and girls who have been subject to the most unimaginable sexual violence of Daesh? We must do more to support them.

Priti Patel: I announced today that we will be providing the necessary humanitarian aid, but 46,000 vulnerable and displaced people, many of whom are women and girls who have been subject to such atrocities and violence, will also receive support through that money.

KEVIN FOSTER (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that the liberation of Mosul is a vindication of those on both sides of the House who were prepared to vote to give our allies on the ground the military support that they needed, rather than those who only wanted to offer warm words and hand-wringing in response to Daesh's advance. Does she agree that getting people back into work is vital for getting things back to normal? What specific work will the Department be doing to bring Mosul's economy back to life?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right that the liberation of Mosul represents a great opportunity to rebuild the country and put infrastructure in place. We need to work collectively with our partners and with the companies that will go in and help to create jobs, new economic opportunities and prosperity. That is a major feature of the stabilisation and rebuilding work that DFID is leading on with colleagues from across Government and with our international counterparts.

Points of Order

1.23 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any notice from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about an impending statement on Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' "Building our Future" programme? Today, the Department made the outrageous decision to move over 1,000 jobs from my constituency to Edinburgh, despite the publication of a National Audit Office report just before the election that damned the programme. Questions are being asked about the inappropriate use of funds during purdah, and the public and my constituents cannot have confidence in this Parliament and its processes until they get answers. What can you do to assist me and my constituents?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. In short, I have received no indication from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of an intention to come to the House to make an oral statement. I think that something has been announced, either in the form of a written statement or some media communication, outwith what I would call oral discourse. That said, the hon. Lady, in her relatively short time in the House, has become an adroit deployer of the various mechanisms available to her to pursue the interests of her constituents. There are some days to go before the House rises for the summer recess, and if she judges that there is an urgency attached to this matter, I am sure that she will have recourse to the appropriate mechanism, and I will look out for it. What is more, I rather imagine that she will be in her seat, and leaping up and down from it, at business questions tomorrow.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many people, myself included, will have been disappointed to read in today's papers that the Prime Minister has postponed the publication of a report, which she ordered as part of her mission to tackle "burning injustices", that audits and examines how people of different backgrounds are treated by public services. The reason for the delay is reportedly because it is "explosive" and "pretty bad". Given the genuine and growing concern, is it in order for the Prime Minister to postpone a publication because she does

not like the findings and because it will look bad for her Government? Is there a way that Parliament can have sight of the report that the Prime Minister is trying to hide?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that nothing disorderly has taken place. The timing of Government statements and the release of Government reports are matters for Ministers, not the Chair. However, if there is a completed report and if the hon. Lady and others are keen to know its contents and are not aware of any particularly compelling reason why it cannot be published sooner rather than later, it is open to the hon. Lady to seek to cajole or entice an appropriate Minister to come to the House in the remaining days before we rise for the summer recess. I cannot commit that that will happen, but I have this keen sense that the hon. Lady will return to the issue and probably seek some sort of adjudication from me in the days ahead.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the First Secretary of State claimed that people with mental health conditions are more likely to be supported by the personal independence payment than the disability living allowance. The mental health charity Mind has made it absolutely clear that 55% of people with mental health conditions transferring from DLA to PIP have no award or a reduced award. I would be grateful if you could advise me on how we can have the record corrected.

Mr Speaker: It is fair to say that the hon. Lady has found her own salvation, in that she has put her thought on the record in characteristically robust, but thankfully pithy, form, and that will now form part of the *Official Report*. I am well aware—I would be failing in my duty if I were not—that she has strong views on this matter, and that those views differ markedly from those of the First Secretary of State. I think it is fair to say that this is properly a matter for debate, but we shall leave it there, albeit only for today.

If there are no further points of order, we come to the general debate on the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry, and I am looking to the First Secretary of State to open the debate at his second outing at the Dispatch Box today.

Grenfell Tower Fire Inquiry

1.28 pm

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

I begin by expressing my deep sympathy to all those who lost family members and other loved ones in this terrible tragedy. Their suffering is beyond imagining. Our thoughts also go out to all those who lost their homes and possessions in the fire. Since that terrible event of 14 June—a month ago—we have all been deeply affected by that unprecedented tragedy, and words feel inadequate.

I pay tribute to the men and women of our emergency services, many of whom risked life and limb in their efforts to tackle the fire and showed extraordinary courage in their determination to save lives. Equally important, I pay tribute to the many volunteers and charities that have given their time and much, much more to help the bereaved and those who have lost their home.

Sir Martin Moore-Bick, the chair of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, is currently consulting on the scope of the inquiry's terms of reference, so this debate provides an opportunity for Parliament to express its views on the inquiry before the terms of reference are set. Of course, it is most important that the chair listens to the views of those most affected by the tragedy and takes account of those views when considering the scope of his inquiry's terms of reference, but I am sure Sir Martin will want to reflect on the views expressed in this House today—we should all be conscious that the survivors of this terrible tragedy will also be listening.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so early. Does he agree that it will be important to have an interim report? If there are recommendations that address crucial safety issues with high-rise blocks, clearly they need to be attended to as soon as possible.

Damian Green: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct, and he may be aware that there is an intention to produce an interim report as soon as is practical. I am conscious that one of the great wishes of many survivors, and of the groups representing them, is for as many of the questions as possible to be resolved as quickly as possible.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure there will be lots of comments on the scope of the report during this debate, and I do not want to widen it too far, but can the First Secretary of State assure the House that the scope will include private blocks and not be confined to social housing? In my experience as a city centre Member of Parliament, it is often much more difficult for residents of private blocks with opaque ownership and unresponsive managing agents than for residents of social blocks to have their voices heard.

Damian Green: The hon. Lady makes a good point. I cannot guarantee what the terms of reference will be, because that is obviously a matter for Sir Martin, but one of the purposes of this debate is precisely to allow

such views to be expressed. I am happy to assure her and the House that the testing regime for the safety of blocks does extend to private blocks.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Will the First Secretary say what has happened to the independent recovery taskforce, which was announced about a week ago by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government? We do not know who the members are, what they are doing or whether they have been to Kensington. If the taskforce has not yet been convened, will he reconsider sending in commissioners, particularly given what we heard this morning? We heard that the person to whom the taskforce is reporting, the new leader of Kensington and Chelsea London Borough Council, despite being a councillor for 11 years and a cabinet member for five years, has not seen fit to go into any of the tower blocks in her borough.

Damian Green: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the taskforce is an independent body that will report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, not to Kensington and Chelsea Council.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Pursuant to that point, will the First Secretary clarify whether the recovery taskforce has any executive authority whatsoever, or is it purely advisory?

Damian Green: It is an advisory panel, not an executive one, reporting to the Secretary of State. That is the proper way to proceed.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Is the First Secretary saying that the taskforce has no executive authority and that executive authority remains with the council? Is there a distinction between the taskforce's powers and the powers that would be available to a commissioner, if one were appointed?

Damian Green: The taskforce will be overseeing what the council does but, as I have said to other Opposition Members, it will report to the Secretary of State, who can then decide the appropriate way to proceed. The taskforce is independent of the council, is not reporting to the council and will oversee what the council is doing.

The Prime Minister rightly identified the immediate priority when she announced the inquiry: establishing the facts of what happened at Grenfell Tower in order to take the necessary action to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again. The inquiry will fulfil that purpose and will report in two phases, with an interim report being published as quickly as possible.

Beyond that immediate focus, it is also important that all the wider lessons from this catastrophe, and from the inspections of other buildings around the country that followed it, are identified and learned. Sir Martin has said:

“I should make it clear that I shall want to consider a broad range of evidence, including on the role of the relevant public authorities and contractors, in order to help me answer the important questions.”

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am grateful to the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member

for Reading West (Alok Sharma), for answering my written question on the privatisation of housing functions in Kensington and Chelsea Council. I find it extraordinary that there is no central management, nor even records kept, of housing contracts within the housing department. We now have a situation where there is no accountability and no transparency on the nature of local authority contracts with the private sector involving housing, or on the degree to which housing contracts are subcontracted to other private providers. In view of this tragedy, will the First Secretary advise me on whether there are plans to revisit that policy?

Damian Green: There is clearly a large range of issues on which the inquiry may wish to make recommendations to the Government, and the hon. Lady has put that thought on the record. As I said, I imagine that Sir Martin will wish to take note of the views expressed in this debate.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): On a wider point, my right hon. Friend will appreciate that many survivors suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning. Of course, carbon monoxide is known as the silent killer. Will he ensure that, among the many other lessons that are learned, the planned review of carbon monoxide alarms actually goes ahead in October 2017?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. A range of lessons need to be learnt from this terrible tragedy. As he knows, an expert panel with a range of skills and expertise across a number of areas will be helping the inquiry. Again, he raises an important issue that not only the Government but the inquiry itself will want to consider.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The First Secretary is right that no stone should be left unturned in uncovering the truth behind the horror that was the Grenfell Tower fire. On wider lessons and action in the meantime, Birmingham has 231 tower blocks and the city council has rightly decided that it will retrofit sprinklers in all of them, costing £31 million to a council that has suffered £700 million of cuts to its budget. Will the Government unequivocally commit to funding all the necessary safety measures, pending the outcome of the inquiry?

Damian Green: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that the necessary safety measures recommended by the fire service will be met by the Government. The inquiry is designed to ascertain the causes of the tragedy.

Jack Dromey: For clarity, the First Secretary has just made an important statement. Is he saying that the necessary safety measures to protect 10,000 households in 231 blocks will be funded by the Government?

Damian Green: For clarity, I will go all the way through this. If the fire service recommends that something needs to be done for safety reasons, the local authority will be the first port of call to pay for it—I am sure all local authorities will want to follow the fire service's recommendations on this. If a local authority can show that it cannot afford it, central Government will obviously

then step in. That is a matter for local authorities and the fire service in the first instance. Clearly, that is the sensible way to proceed.

Lucy Powell: Will the First Secretary give way?

Damian Green: I have been very generous in giving way and I really need to make some progress.

The inquiry will need to examine all relevant circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower, its spread to the whole building and its effect on residents. That necessarily means looking at circumstances well beyond the design, construction and modification of the building itself. It will mean looking at the role of relevant public authorities and the contractors, and the broader implications of the fire for the adequacy and enforcement of relevant regulations. It will also mean looking at the handling of concerns previously expressed by local residents.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) rose—

Damian Green: May I make some progress and then I will give way? I am conscious that many Members want to contribute to this debate. I have been extremely generous in giving way during my opening remarks, and I think the House will benefit from my making progress.

Sir Martin is highly respected, and as a recently retired Court of Appeal judge he brings with him many years of judicial experience. He and the Government fully agree that, for this inquiry, consulting on the terms of reference is an important way of involving those affected by the tragedy. It is clearly right that those affected by this terrible tragedy, and others with an interest, are given the opportunity to shape the terms of reference, which will in turn give direction and focus to the inquiry. Sir Martin has started that consultation process and is keen to give as many people as possible the chance to contribute to the consultation. He will consider all suggestions made to him when drawing up the terms of reference. He will then make a recommendation to the Prime Minister, who under the Inquiries Act 2005 is responsible for setting out the terms of reference.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Green: May I do so in a moment? I will give way again, but first I wish to finish this section of my speech.

I will quote Sir Martin at length, because this is at the heart of many of the issues that have arisen:

"I am determined to establish the causes of the tragedy, and ensure that the appropriate lessons are learnt. To do this, the Inquiry will need to examine all relevant circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire at Grenfell Tower, in order to understand its causes and prevent such a tragedy ever happening again."

To produce a report as quickly as possible, with clear recommendations for action, I will listen to people and consider a broad range of evidence, including on the role of the relevant public authorities and contractors, in order to help me answer the important questions.

I therefore want to hear from people directly affected by the fire and others involved, to listen to their views on the shape of the Inquiry's work and the questions we should be seeking to answer."

[*Damian Green*]

That is clearly the right approach. Sir Martin has set a deadline for comments of Friday 28 July, extended by two weeks from the inquiry's original deadline, following discussions between Sir Martin and survivors of the fire and other residents of the estate, which made it clear that those affected need more time to respond to the consultation. That extension will allow the inquiry to begin its work in August. I am sure we are all agreed that the sooner the inquiry can begin its work, the sooner we will have the important conclusions of its interim report. It is important to point out that the public and others with an interest will of course be able to feed into the inquiry throughout the course of its work, by writing to it or emailing the contact address provided on its website. The terms of reference can always be revised during the course of the inquiry, and that may be likely as the inquiry reflects on what it has learned at the interim report stage, before it begins phase 2 of its work.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I am heartened to hear about the inclusivity of the inquiry, and public safety must be at its forefront. Will the inquiry look back historically and examine the effectiveness of the fire regulations and enforcement regime introduced in 2005 and 2006 respectively?

Damian Green: My hon. Friend raises a valid and important point. I assure her that the expert panel, which covers a range of different expertise, is already looking at that, and it will feed into the inquiry.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Following on from the question asked by the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), the building regulations should be due for review. In this country that usually happens every 10 years, and 11 have now passed. The Lakanal House inquiry recommended in 2013 that building regulations should be reviewed. The Government have been saying since 2011, including after Lakanal House, that that would be done by this year. We do not have to wait for a public inquiry to say that building regulations should be reviewed. When will the working party be recalled, to show that that work is under way?

Damian Green: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has huge experience and expertise in this area. I assure him that the expert panel is considering whether any advice needs to be given urgently to the Secretary of State to act on.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The First Secretary is right that there should be a consultation on the remit to try to help to rebuild the local community's trust in the inquiry, but is he prepared to go further? Should not there be an advisory panel made up of genuine and diverse community members?

Damian Green: The right hon. Gentleman may know that a similar group, namely Grenfell United, has already brought together many other groups. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), had a long and extensive meeting with the

group last night. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the views of those most affected are being fed to Sir Martin directly, and they are also in direct communication with the Secretary of State.

In terms of the potential appointment of panel members, the priority at this stage is for consultation on the terms of reference, which once agreed will allow the inquiry to start work. The chair will then want to consider what other expert assistance might be required and how that should be provided to the inquiry, including the process of consultation.

I assure the House that Government work is already in hand to address issues highlighted by this terrible tragedy. The Department for Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office are working together across the piece and on the wider building safety programme, about which I know hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned. DCLG has written to local councils and housing associations, calling for checks to social housing. A survey of the public sector estate began on 28 June, with a request for Government Departments and arm's length bodies to review all public buildings in line with provided guidance and to submit samples for testing from priority buildings with aluminium composite material cladding.

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Is the First Secretary aware that a lot of DCLG advice has been contradictory? It initially informed us that certain kinds of cladding had to be removed, but then its position changed and it said that certain kinds of cladding could still be safe as part of fire safety systems. There was also a lack of clarity about whether that testing regime was compulsory. That appeared to be the initial position, but now we have been informed that the Department was responding to landlords' concerns. Is the First Secretary aware that such flip-flopping is causing a lot of confusion and concern, including among tenants?

Damian Green: The expert panel, which I have mentioned on a number of occasions, includes precisely the people to provide advice and it continues to do so. Its advice has been consistently followed by the Department because it has that expertise. It may well discover more and decide that its advice needs to change, but it is all done on the basis of fire safety experts who are independent of Government.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I grew up in a two-bed flat in a council block and the traditional advice was always to stay put and await rescue. I wonder how many souls perished following that traditional advice. Will the advice change?

Damian Green: That issue may well be addressed by Sir Martin in the public inquiry, which is clearly the appropriate forum for that sort of investigation.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Even as we speak, and before the inquiry has begun, new tower blocks continue to be constructed and developed in my constituency and around the country. What new advice has been issued to planning authorities, those who monitor construction standards and the building industry?

Damian Green: The expert panel published new advice last week in a memorandum of understanding about what should be done about new blocks, so that issue has been addressed very directly over the past month.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On the points that were just made, I have constituents with disabilities who live in tower blocks on higher floors who have expressed great concern about what they should do in the event of an emergency. Sometimes they have been given conflicting advice about, for example, whether people in wheelchairs should be using lifts, which is contrary to general advice. Will the First Secretary encourage the inquiry to consider people with disabilities who live on higher floors?

Damian Green: As the hon. Lady will know, rules are already in place to cover precisely that type of thing. The best advice is obviously that those rules should be obeyed. The fire safety advisers are looking at what happened and what should happen in future, but it will be the local fire safety authorities that give that advice. I am sure they will all have been looking carefully at the advice they have been giving, particularly to people in wheelchairs and so on, who clearly will be understandably concerned about whether they are getting the right safety advice. I advise the hon. Lady to talk to her local fire safety officials.

Over the past month, the Cabinet Office has established a cross-Government working group called the public estates response group, with a technical sub-group to ensure that all technical advice is understood and is being properly applied. The Government are ensuring full engagement and alignment with activity in the devolved Administrations—I am conscious that they will be concerned as well. As I said, DCLG has formed an expert advisory panel made up of a range of building and fire safety experts to advise the Government on any immediate action required to ensure that buildings are safe. The Cabinet Office is working with DCLG's expert panel and others to establish a remediation plan and the next steps towards the review of building regulations that several Members have asked for. All that work is under way outside the inquiry's timetable, so its completion will not be dependent on the publication of the inquiry's report.

Some of those affected by this terrible event are concerned that an inquest would be more appropriate than an inquiry, and that the inquiry might delay the identification of those who died. I can reassure them that there will be an inquest: the coroner, Dr Fiona Wilcox, is already investigating the deaths—that is a statutory duty. Once the identification of each of the deceased has been completed, I understand that the coroner will open the inquest into each individual death and then adjourn proceedings pending the outcome of other investigations, including the inquiry. The coroner will consider the inquiry's recommendations to determine whether to resume the inquests. The process will not delay the formal identification of victims.

I can reassure those who want a criminal investigation into this terrible tragedy that that is in hand. The Metropolitan police announced the investigation on 16 June. It is one of the largest and most complex investigations ever undertaken by the Metropolitan police, with around 250 specialist investigators currently engaged.

I hope that Members will be reassured by the clear statements about the investigation from the Metropolitan police. Detective Superintendent Fiona McCormack said on 23 June that the investigation would

“identify and investigate any criminal offence and, of course, given the deaths of so many people, we are considering manslaughter, as well as criminal offences and breaches of legislation and regulations”.

That point was reinforced on Monday by Assistant Commissioner Martin Hewitt, who said:

“The investigation we are conducting is a criminal investigation that quite obviously is starting from the potential that there was something that effectively amounts to the manslaughter of those people.”

It is clear that it will be a rigorous, detailed investigation; the police are determined that, if wrongdoing has occurred, the perpetrators will be brought to justice.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry's task is of the utmost importance to establish the facts and make recommendations about the action needed to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again. The Government will provide the inquiry with all the resources it needs to complete its work thoroughly and rapidly. This was a terrible tragedy; we must learn the lessons to ensure nothing like it can happen again.

1.54 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is four weeks to the day since the truly dreadful Grenfell Tower fire—the worst fire and greatest loss of life in this country since at least the London blitz. One hundred and fifty-eight families have lost their homes, and many others have lost loved ones. All are struggling with the horror and trauma of losing family members, of their own escape, and of being left with absolutely nothing. This is the time when they should feel that they can look to their council and their Government for help, as well as to the overwhelming solidarity and support of their local community. But so many do not, and so many feel that they simply cannot trust those in authority to listen to them and do what they promise. This is a very strong message to Ministers, Kensington and Chelsea Council and the chair of the Prime Minister's public inquiry.

Today is one week on from the Prime Minister's deadline for everyone affected to have been found a home nearby, yet just four of the 158 families from Grenfell Tower have moved into a fresh home—and those are only temporary. Today is 24 days on from the start of the Government's testing programme; the Prime Minister said that we could test more than 100 buildings a day, yet only 224 tests have been done, almost all on one type of filler in one type of cladding. Today is four years and four months since two official coroners' reports following other fatal tower-block fires, yet the Government have still failed to act on their recommendations. And today is almost three weeks since the Prime Minister said that

“we simply have not given enough attention to social housing”—[Official Report, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 169.]

Yet, in her speech yesterday crying out for ideas—any ideas for a domestic policy programme—there was no mention of housing and no mention of the words “social housing”.

This is the measure of the Government's response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy: too slow to act; too slow to grasp the gravity and complexity of the problems; and

[*John Healey*]

one step off the pace at every stage. Let me spell out to the First Secretary and his colleagues the pledge that the Labour party makes, as the official Opposition, to, above all, the survivors and the relatives of the families from Grenfell Tower: we will not rest until all those who need help and a new home have it; until all those culpable have been brought fully to account; and until all measures needed to make sure that this can never, ever happen again are fully in place.

We welcome the Prime Minister's public inquiry and what the First Secretary said about this debate helping to inform the terms of reference and the way the inquiry will be conducted. We will make a submission to the Prime Minister on the terms of reference and recommend an approach like that of the Macpherson inquiry, with the appointment of panel members with deep experience in community relations to help to overcome the serious gulf in trust that many in the north Kensington community feel.

Let me turn to housing and the help for the survivors. The pledges that the Government have made to the families and the survivors—no-strings financial assistance, open access to trauma counselling, guaranteed school places, no legal action on immigration status or sub-letting, and rehousing—are all welcome and important. But there is still a big gap between what Ministers are saying to us in the House and what the residents and the community in north Kensington are saying is happening to them.

On housing, how is it, one week after the Prime Minister's deadline, that only four families have moved into a fresh home and 13 others have been offered somewhere they feel they can say yes to? Who is finding, checking and offering this temporary accommodation? Who is providing the reassurance needed for the families? Who is in charge?

Rebecca Pow: The right hon. Gentleman is making a good point, and of course these people, their homes and rehousing them is of the utmost importance, but to politicise the figures and to argue—[*Interruption*.] I do not know where he is getting his figures from. I was led to believe that 139 people had received offers of accommodation and many families have agreed not yet to engage, because they are not quite ready—we cannot force them to either. I am not sure where the statistics are coming from or whether all the scaremongering about statistics is helping to solve the actual problem, which this Government are getting on with doing.

John Healey: The First Secretary's speech to this House was fact and figure free. If I am wrong about the fact that only four of these families, after nearly one month, have moved into a fresh home—a temporary home—and the rest are still in hotels, he can get up and correct me, but he is not doing so. The hon. Lady talks about scaremongering and political point scoring, but it is precisely the decisions and policies of those in power that the Grenfell Tower residents want challenged. And it is precisely the questions of policy, ideology and responsibility in government that lie at the heart of the deep changes needed to fix the housing crisis in this country, and her own Prime Minister has recognised that.

Damian Green: Just to clear up any confusion in the right hon. Gentleman's mind, 159 families have been offered accommodation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) rightly said. Some of those have said—I heard the leader of Kensington's council say this this morning—that they do not wish yet to make the move into the housing they have been offered. Of course everyone across the House will recognise that we need to meet those wishes. These people have to decide how they can try to cope with this, but I can assure the right hon. Gentleman and the House that 159 of the families identified have been offered accommodation—some of them have been offered more than one type of accommodation. That commitment has been met.

John Healey: I think the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government may want to set the record entirely straight when he winds up this debate. I take the First Secretary at his word for now, but last week we were told that 158 families lost their homes in Grenfell Tower, and 139 had been offered accommodation by the Prime Minister's deadline. Last week, only three had moved out. This week—today—four weeks on, four had moved out and only a further 13 have actually been given offers that they feel they can accept. There is a huge gap between what Ministers are saying here and what residents are saying there. That is the problem, and the question to the First Secretary and the Secretary of State is: who is sorting this out? Who is in charge? Who is responsible for this continuing failure to provide the homes and the start again that people need? I am sure the First Secretary would accept that a hotel room is no home and that temporary accommodation is no place in which to try to rebuild a shattered life. So the top and the urgent priority must be for Ministers to find the permanent homes that are needed.

We welcome the 68 homes in Kensington Row that now will be available, as social housing, for the residents of Grenfell Tower. The rest could be done straightforwardly by doing a deal with local housing associations to make new homes available; by leasing or buying vacant private properties in the area; and by funding the council to build or acquire the new homes needed. The Government might even force Kensington and Chelsea Council to use some its reported £274 million in reserves to take this urgent priority action.

Andy Slaughter: Most of the residents who have been decanted are in budget hotels—I know that as I have visited a number who were unceremoniously dumped in my borough by Kensington and Chelsea Council, without money, a change of clothes or anything of that kind—and have been there for four weeks. None of those people are there because they want to be there; they are there because they have not been made appropriate offers. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the Government should stop this sophistry and get on with offering decent, permanent homes to people who have suffered extraordinary trauma?

John Healey: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend about that. He speaks with a special authority, as a neighbouring MP who has spent a great deal of the past four weeks in the North Kensington community, working

alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) to try to support and give voice to the concerns of survivors.

Let me move on to the issue of safety testing. It is totally unacceptable, four weeks on from the Grenfell Tower fire, that Ministers still do not know and cannot say how many of the country's other tower blocks are unsafe. The Government's testing programme is too slow, too narrow and too confused. This is a testing programme in chaos. Only 224 tests have been done, yet an estimated 530 tower blocks have the same cladding and we have a total of 4,000 tower blocks across the country. That means that 24 days after the start of this testing programme, which we were told could test 100 buildings a day, we find that tests have been done on only half the highest-risk blocks and on fewer than one in 20 of the total number of tower blocks around the country.

Ms Buck: Last week, the Secretary of State said that there was "no backlog" in testing and that tests would be processed within a matter of "hours". Given the continuing shortfall in the number of high-rise buildings that have been subject to testing, does my right hon. Friend share my bafflement that the Government do not appear to know where any of this material actually is?

John Healey: Yes, I share my hon. Friend's bafflement entirely. I also hear of councils and housing associations that want to test their buildings, which may not have the same type of cladding, but simply cannot get the tests. I note, again, that the First Secretary's speech was entirely free of any facts or figures that can update the House on the chaos of this testing programme.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Camden Council has done the testing in my constituency and, as a result, has evacuated more than 3,000 people from the Chalcots estate. The council is spending its own money to try to ensure that the buildings are fit for purpose before the residents are placed in them again. Does he agree that the Government should be giving financial support to councils such as Camden after cutting their budgets for years on end?

John Healey: The short answer is yes; the longer answer is that I pay tribute to Camden Council for taking the tough decision that it had to make in those circumstances. My fear is that other housing associations, councils and landlords of high-rise blocks around the country will hold back or perhaps cut corners because they know they cannot afford to do the works required—either to remove and replace cladding, or to make the inside safe and fully fire-safety compliant—and that they will do so only because they cannot get a straight answer from this Government on a clear commitment to up-front funding where it is needed to make sure that this essential work is done. The situation leaves hundreds of thousands of residents in tower blocks around the country still uncertain as to whether their block is safe.

I hope that Ministers will stay to hear the debate because a number of colleagues from around the country will set out concerns about the testing system, including the problem that landlords and residents are confused.

The testing system does not meet the needs of those residents or landlords. We know from the Lakanal House fire that cladding is not the whole problem—nor, I suspect, was it in Grenfell—yet only one component of one type of cladding had been tested until very recently. We are therefore talking about no tests on cladding systems, on insulation materials, on the interaction between cladding and insulation, on installation, and on the fire breaks between floors. I can tell the First Secretary of State and the Secretary of State that housing associations across the country, such as Bradford-based Incommunities, cannot get their type of cladding tested, so they cannot reassure their residents that their tower blocks are safe. Councils such as Salford have stopped stripping off cladding from their high-rise flats because they have no guidance from Government on what to replace it with.

Seema Malhotra: I wish to comment on that point in relation to Hounslow Council. I commend it for the speed with which it was able to de-clad a block in my constituency, but it has hit some of these concerns about what to replace that cladding with. Given the amount of re-cladding that might take place across the country, I am worried that the producers of that cladding could jack up the prices, thus making the replacement even more expensive.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. Her council, like Oxford, is in the dark on this—it simply does not know what the Government's guidance and advice will be. If it takes off the cladding, what does it replace that with, because the council must be certain that it is safe?

The First Secretary of State rightly made great play of the panel of independent experts in his speech. The panel is there to advise Ministers on the urgent lessons that need to be learned and the action that needs to be taken, and that is very welcome. I hope that the panel can help the Government to get back on track and deal with some of the following concerns, which Ministers will hear about from colleagues right across the country. What advice will the Government give to landlords—and what reassurance will they give to residents—if cladding systems pass the new second round of tests despite the fact that they failed the narrow first test? If cladding fails the Government's tests, must it be taken off tower blocks in all circumstances, and will the Government cover the costs of taking it down and replacing it? When will councils and housing associations be able to get other cladding or insulation tested? How will the Government make sure that all internal fire safety works that are now being carried out inside tower blocks meet the highest safety standards? Will the Government launch an immediate review into the approved inspectors responsible for building control checks, as well as who hires them, who pays them and who approves their qualifications, starting with all those responsible for signing off the systems that are being failed by the Government's tests?

Four weeks on, Ministers must widen their testing programme and reassure all high-rise tenants that their buildings are safe, or commit to fund the urgent work necessary to make them safe. The clearest warnings that the system of fire safety checks and building controls was failing came more than four years ago following the inquest into fatal tower block fires at Lakanal House

[*John Healey*]

and Shirley Towers. Both coroners wrote formal rule 43 letters to Ministers with recommendations to improve fire safety in high-rise buildings. Such letters are written by coroners only when the Government can prevent further loss of life—that is their importance. Some of the recommendations were simply rejected, such as making internal cable supports fire resistant and providing onsite information about a tower block to firefighters arriving to fight a blaze.

Ministers said that they would act on other recommendations, but they have not. The Government passed all responsibility for retrofitting sprinkler systems on to landlords. In 2014, one Minister even said:

“We believe that it is the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government.”

On overhauling building regulations, the Government promised a review but it did not happen. The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), has just told me that

“this work will now need to be informed by any recommendations that the independent inquiry into Grenfell Tower fire makes.”

Rather than waiting months or years to start this work, Ministers must put this right now. They must start installing sprinkler systems in the highest-risk high-rise blocks and start the overhaul of building regulations, into which any findings from the fire investigations or the public inquiry can be incorporated.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Has my right hon. Friend picked up on the rumour about the review of building regulations in the Department for Communities and Local Government? I have heard that the review was paused because the civil servants who were leading on it were put on to other work related to Brexit. If that is true, how many other pieces of essential, urgent and safety-related work are on pause in government right now?

John Healey: I had not heard that rumour—I prefer to deal with the facts in front of us—but my hon. Friend is dead right that there is a serious question of capacity in DCLG. There is an even greater question over leadership, which I shall come on to in a moment.

Finally, I want to turn to the “fundamental issues”, as the Prime Minister described them, that were raised by the Grenfell Tower fire. When a country as decent and well-off as ours fails to provide something as basic as a safe home for its citizens, things must change. Let me mention two areas, the first of which is regulation. Surely Members in all parts of the House would agree that all markets, organisations and consumers require regulation to guarantee quality and safety, to ensure fair practice and to stop abuse, yet that is not the current Government’s mindset. Never again can we have a Government Minister who, when challenged on fire safety measures after the fire in Camberwell, said that they were not the Government’s responsibility, justifying that with the “one in, two out” approach to regulation. If the Prime Minister and First Secretary of State are serious about change, they should start by confirming that that approach came to an end with the Cameron-Osborne era of Conservative government.

Sir Edward Davey: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. He and the House might like to know that when I was a junior Business Minister, people from No. 10 and the Cabinet Office asked me whether we should get rid of fire safety regulations for girls’ and ladies’ nightdresses and furniture. I said no. We did not get rid of them, nor should we have done. He is absolutely right that we have to change the culture.

John Healey: I am grateful for that unexpected support from the Liberal Democrat Benches. The right hon. Gentleman’s very important and specific point supports my general argument.

The second area is social housing. For decades after the second world war, there was a national cross-party consensus about the value of social housing to help to meet the housing needs and aspirations of many ordinary families. There is a recognition that there has been only one year since the second world war in which this country has built more than 200,000 new homes without the public sector doing at least a third of them. This is the first Government since the second world war to provide no funding to help to build new social-rented housing, and they have also ended all funding through the Homes and Communities Agency programme for decent homes, which is investment to bring social housing up to scratch. If the First Secretary of State and the Prime Minister were serious about social housing, they would lift the cap on councils borrowing to build and maintain their homes, restore central Government investment to help to build new social housing, guarantee “first dibs” on new homes for local people, and strengthen the hand of councils to get better deals from big developers for their residents.

Finally, we hear that the Prime Minister wants us to “contribute” rather than just “criticise”. I have to ask this: has she asked her Cabinet to contribute? What does the Secretary of State have to contribute to solving the country’s housing crisis; to doing more on social housing; to reversing the plunging rate of home ownership, especially for young people; to giving 11 million private renters basic consumer rights; and to preventing the rapidly rising numbers of homeless people sleeping on our streets? Where is the plan? Where is the hope? Where is the leadership? If the Prime Minister wants a domestic policy programme, and if she wants to find common cause and to make fundamental changes to Government policy, we stand ready to contribute—we offer our Labour housing manifesto, published last month, as a starter.

If the Government want our support for a plan to tackle the country’s housing crisis, they must raise their sights. If Ministers want our support for their recovery programme post-Grenfell, they must raise their game.

2.20 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I agree with the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) on one aspect: this accident should not have happened in a country such as ours. He is also right to argue for a national and clear approach that does not just concentrate on one issue but considers all the issues involved.

Slightly uncharacteristically, the right hon. Gentleman was not prepared to accept—at least he seemed not to—that, over the years, both main parties have made mistakes in this area when in government. If he thinks

back to 2005-06, when the enforcement regime was weakened and the building regulations changed, he might wonder whether that tackled the problem. The previous Labour Government also had a deplorable record on building houses. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman can be holier than thou in this debate, as he was tempted to be.

I should like to pay tribute to the local community for all it has done at the Westway centre. People were generous and warm-hearted; they put their arms around the victims' families. Our thoughts are, correctly, with the victims and families, but I pay tribute to the communities of Latimer Road and the Westway, who come out of this very strongly.

It is time that fires that claim lives in high-rise buildings were a thing of the past. In February 2005, there was a fire in Stevenage in my constituency, at Harrow Court, a high-rise, 17-storey block of flats. Two firemen lost their lives, including my constituent Jeff Wornham; a member of the public died as well. Jeff came from a family who are very committed to public service. He was extremely brave in the fire and saved lives. His loss was felt in my constituency and by his family, friends and the fire service in Hertfordshire more widely.

The incident led to a fire investigation by Hertfordshire fire and rescue service—a very good service with a lot of experience of dealing with hazardous materials. It fought the Buncefield fire as well as that could have been fought. It is generally a highly respected fire and rescue service, and one of its recommendations was that the UK fire service should explore options for high-rise buildings to have provision for sprinklers. I felt at the time that that was an important matter, and we had a Westminster Hall debate about Hertfordshire firefighters' safety. The then fire Minister, Sadiq Khan, met Jeff's father, Robert Wornham, and fire safety experts to discuss the case for sprinklers being retrofitted to all high-rise blocks; sprinkler experts also went to the meeting. That retrofitting has not happened, but Robert Wornham still believes that it is an important way of helping to ensure fire safety in such blocks. He contacted me recently to say that he hoped that the issue can get back on the agenda.

After 2007, the rules were changed for new buildings more than 30 metres high, which are now required to be fitted with sprinkler systems. Some local authorities have gone ahead and retrofitted sprinklers to some of their blocks. As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne mentioned, coroners have recommended retrofitting sprinklers on two occasions. But that has not been the general rule. We need a national approach—something clear.

The British Automatic Fire Sprinkler Association estimates that the cost of fitting a system in Grenfell Tower would have been about £200,000. We need to establish the truth of what happened in Grenfell Tower and make sure it does not happen again. I hope that the retrofitting of sprinkler systems can be firmly and urgently considered, because that may be long overdue.

I turn to the investigations that have been ordered. There is a police investigation, which will look at criminal wrongdoing, but it is good that a judicial public inquiry has been announced by the Prime Minister. The two types of investigation have different purposes. Public inquiries investigate issues of serious public concern, scrutinising decisions and events. The Inquiries Act 2005

ensures that witnesses can be compelled and documents brought forward without any difficulties—something that did not happen with other forms of inquiry.

Public inquiries are different from criminal investigations, but the parallel criminal investigation into the fire that is being carried out by the Metropolitan police will be informed by the public inquiry. Facts are given and recommendations made in a public inquiry, and if the inquiry comes across criminal activity during its investigation, it will obviously pass that information to the police. That is its duty.

There has been some discussion nationally about the choice of chair for the public inquiry. People from all over the world come to our country to have their legal issues resolved. They come here because we have independent-minded judges who do not mind telling the Government where to get off when they are wrong. Our judges are of the highest quality and there is a transparent system that people trust. That is why the English legal system has been copied all over the world, and why people respect it so much. Our common-law system is excellent.

The choice of chair for the public inquiry is a senior judge. Think of the Hillsborough case, over which a senior judge presided. Nobody would argue that such judges are not capable of dealing with a complex case and getting right to the heart of the issues. The Lord Chancellor asked the Lord Chief Justice for a recommendation of a judge who would be best suited to leading a public inquiry of this sort. The Lord Chief Justice recommended Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Sir Martin is one of our most respected judges, with extensive experience of trying complex cases, including the investigation of disasters. He was vice-president of the civil division of the Court of Appeal—one of our most senior judges—until he retired in December. He will be thorough and get to the heart of the issues.

Members in all parts of the House are determined that there will be justice for victims of the tragedy and for their families. I believe that the combination of a judge-led inquiry and a police investigation will achieve that. We can judge how well a judge will run an inquiry by how speedily he gets on with the matter in hand. By immediately consulting—he opened the consultation on 5 July—to establish the terms of reference, Sir Martin has shown that he is seeking a wide range of views. That bodes well for the inquiry. He wants to hear from those directly affected by the fire and from others who have a contribution to make. He is having a series of meetings to listen to victims' families, survivors and others affected, and to take their views.

It is welcome that the chair has been so open to ideas, and that he said he wants to establish the terms of reference as soon as possible, so that the inquiry can begin making sure that we know what happened and how to stop it from ever happening again. I am personally a strong supporter of a judge-led inquiry, and I hope it will be possible to have a relatively early interim report that will deal with some of the key issues, such as sprinkler systems and cladding, so that we have the national, clear approach mentioned by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne. I am a strong supporter of the inquiry, and I would like sprinklers to be strongly on the agenda.

2.29 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the Government's announcement of a full public inquiry into this terrible tragedy. But we are clear that, as others have already said, no stone should be left unturned in ascertaining not just the immediate cause of the fire but the wider causes of what happened and what went wrong in order to ensure that the appropriate lessons are learned and to get justice for those affected.

Our thoughts and sympathies are very much with those affected by this terrible tragedy, and it goes without saying that we pay tribute to the bravery and professionalism of the first responders and the emergency services who dealt with the matter. I want to address, though, the scope and nature of the inquiry. I am glad to say that the days when inquiries in the United Kingdom were establishment whitewashes are long over. Our modern society could not tolerate the sort of cover-up we saw in the now notorious Widgery tribunal after the Bloody Sunday massacre, or the delay that occurred before the Hillsborough families found justice. However, we should always be mindful that the history of inquiries has seen many examples of justice being delayed and being denied altogether.

It seems that this most often happens when those affected by death and disaster come from among the ranks of those who do not have wealth, power or influence in our society. I am thinking about the fleeing unarmed Catholic civilians who were shot dead by the Army on Bloody Sunday while protesting for their basic civil rights, and the innocent Liverpool football fans who were unlawfully killed at Hillsborough while going about their lawful business and then wrongfully blamed for so many years for being the cause of their own deaths. Those two incidents are very different from the Grenfell Tower inquiry, but I was struck by the words of one Grenfell survivor that were recently brought to my attention by the Scottish journalist and commentator Lesley Riddoch. The man's name was Mehed Egal, and he told the BBC:

"We are not poor people, we are working-class people. We are leaseholders. We are homeowners. We pay tax. We pay council tax. We make the economy turn while the rich put us in hazardous positions. I'm not going to hold back—we have been neglected from the get-go and we are neglected still."

Those words may be uncomfortable for some to hear, but they cannot and should not be ignored as they come from a survivor and someone who lived in the tower block.

Underlying this tragedy is the stark contrast in our society between those who have wealth, power and influence, and those who do not. What I mean by that is that it seems unthinkable—to me, at least—that those with power, wealth and influence would have been condemned to live in accommodation that seems to have been such a death trap. The tragedy raises real questions about the inequalities in our society and the inadequate provision of social housing in cities such as London. There is real issue as to whether the inquiry will be of adequate scope to address not just the immediate causes of the fire and its rapid spread, but systemic issues underlying the tragedy. The terms of reference are vital. It is also vital that the participants have confidence in the chair, and that all participants have adequate funding to ensure representation and equality of arms. I will take each of those issues in turn.

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry is often considered an exemplar of what an inquiry should do. It is worth remembering that that inquiry's terms of reference were simply,

"matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence."

In the Grenfell case, the survivors are concerned about some comments made by the judge chosen to chair the inquiry that suggested, at an earlier stage, that the inquiry will be restricted to issues relating to how the fire started, rather than examining wider issues about Grenfell Tower, the council, central Government, and the management and funding of social housing.

I note that the Communities Secretary last week told the House that the Government expect the inquiry to be as broad and wide-ranging as possible, and the First Secretary has today addressed the way in which there can be input into the framing of the terms of reference. What is not clear is whether this House will be able to scrutinise or have any input into the final framing of those terms of reference. In my view, a way should be found to enable that to happen because the Grenfell fire raises issues that concern the public and our constituents all across the UK.

Constituents have written to me, concerned about the extent of the death toll and its composition, which seems to include the poor, immigrants, the elderly, disabled people and undocumented people—people who are sometimes forgotten in society. Members of the public are concerned that the fact seems to be that a refurbishment budget for the block was spent with an emphasis on cladding that was pleasing to the eye, rather than fire-safe, and about the suggestion that not enough was spent on fire safety measures. They are also concerned about the adequacy of the response to the fire. People have asked, "Where was the publicly funded infrastructure dealing with relief? Where was the plan for the aftermath?" We need to ensure that the inquiry's terms of reference encompass those matters, while ensuring that the interim report deals with the immediate fire safety issues.

We should never forget that the decades of failure to investigate properly what happened at Hillsborough began with the controversial decision by the coroner in the inquest to close off certain questions from proper investigation, so we must be very careful not to close off from proper investigation certain questions arising from how the fire came about.

Turning to the chair, the problems with the historical child abuse inquiry show that it is vital to have a chair who commands the confidence of the victims. As a lawyer, I will not cast any aspersions on Sir Martin Moore-Bick's ability to chair the inquiry, but the residents' concerns about his ability must be respected and listened to. Doubt surrounding public confidence in his suitability cannot be ignored because it will undermine the efficacy of the inquiry.

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. and learned Lady knows as well as I do that we are talking about a judge who has dealt with the most complex matters and disasters. How can she say that somebody of that sort of ability, who has been hand-picked to do the job by the Lord Chief Justice, is not the right sort of person to run a judicial inquiry?

Joanna Cherry: That is not a decision for me. I am bringing to the House's attention the perfectly valid concern of local people about the judge's ability to chair the inquiry. I was careful to preface that—*[Interruption.]* Will the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) let me develop my point?

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who is no longer in his place, said that a properly diverse expert panel is required to sit alongside the inquiry judge to advise on a variety of issues. A local organisation, BME Lawyers 4 Grenfell, has made a number of demands, including that there should be such a properly diverse panel to advise on issues including housing need, and fire and safety construction. I respectfully suggest that doubts about the ability of the judge may be allayed if that suggestion is followed. *[Interruption.]* Whether Conservative Members like it or not, it is vital that the people affected by the disaster have confidence in the ability of the constitution of the inquiry to bring about a just result. We do not need to look far back in British history to see many examples where that has not happened, and which shame us.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I am going to develop my point. I will give way in a moment.

All that I and others are asking is that the Minister gives serious consideration to the demand that, in addition to the judge, there should be a properly diverse expert panel that has the proper expertise to advise on issues concerning housing need, and fire and safety construction. We lawyers are not necessarily experts on housing need. The point is that we may need a bit of assistance from somebody who is.

Sir Oliver Heald: People take cases against the Government to our courts the whole time. Judges are keen to do the cases properly, and they kick back at the Government on numerous occasions, as everybody in the House knows. Is the hon. and learned Lady really saying that one of the most senior judges in our country will not be able to do an independent and objective job of the highest quality? *[Interruption.]*

Joanna Cherry: As has been said by a colleague from a sedentary position, that was not what I said. This is not litigation; it is a public inquiry. All I am saying is that the Government have already accepted that a panel of advisers is required. The point I am making is actually quite simple: the panel of advisers should be of suitable expertise and diversity to inspire confidence.

Another thing we need to do to ensure justice is done is to make sure that not only victims but tenants' groups are given public funding for independent and separate legal representation sufficient to enable them to have a voice equal to that of local and national Government and the private management company. This is a simple matter of human rights and equality of arms, and I was pleased that, when I asked the Prime Minister about this on 22 June, she said that, although the way in which the inquiry is conducted is ultimately a matter for the chair, for

"those who require legal representation, that will be funded by the Government"

and that she was not going to

"set any limits in relation to the types of body or the individuals for whom"—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 186-87]—funding would be available. I welcome what she said, because although funding and proper representation are matters for the inquiry, the inquiry can work well only within the constraints imposed on it by the Treasury. If the tenants' groups are not represented in this inquiry, I fear that justice will not be seen to be done.

Finally, before I say something about the position of the devolved Administrations, which the Minister alluded to, I want to turn briefly to question of the inquiry's recommendations being properly implemented. It is vital that this House is empowered to make sure that the recommendations are implemented promptly, because important recommendations are not always implemented promptly. We have already heard about the recommendations after the Lakeland House fire. After a tower block fire in Irvine, in Scotland, in 1999—just before devolution—a Select Committee of this House recommended that all cladding on high-rise dwellings should be non-combustible. Subsequent to devolution, that report was taken seriously by Scottish housing authorities, and building regulations in Scotland were duly amended in 2005. All new high-rise domestic buildings in Scotland are therefore fitted with non-combustible cladding, or a cladding system that meets stringent fire tests, and with sprinklers. The same recommendation was seen as optional south of the border, and it appears now that that has had tragic consequences. So it is vital that this House finds a way to make sure that the inquiry's recommendations are properly implemented.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I join the tributes that have been paid to the victims and the first responders. Many people in Scotland, including in my constituency, still live in tower blocks. Despite the reassurances my hon. and learned Friend has provided, they will nevertheless be looking to the recommendations that come from the inquiry's report. Does she agree that there will be lessons to be learned across the UK and that it is important that assurances are provided not just to the constituents she mentioned earlier but particularly to people who continue to live in tower blocks?

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I have many tower blocks in my constituency, and I was pleased that the City of Edinburgh Council, in very early course, had all elected representatives in to tell us what investigative steps it was taking to make sure these high-rise blocks were safe.

As I have indicated, Scottish building standards are devolved, and the Scottish Government have already set up a ministerial working group to make sure that our buildings are up to scratch and that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is satisfied with the standards in all local buildings. I am pleased to say that all 32 local authorities in Scotland have been able to confirm that none of the high-rise domestic properties they own use the type of cladding we understand was used on Grenfell Tower. However, the Scottish Government are not being complacent, and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will continue to carry out additional operational assurance visits to high-rise buildings. The Scottish Government will continue to monitor the situation in Scotland, gathering information from local authorities and taking

[*Joanna Cherry*]

a proactive and safety-first approach to this issue while we await information from the investigation into the fire in London.

The point I have sought to make in my contribution is that the way this inquiry is set up—the framing of the terms of reference, and the way in which the expert panel that will advise the chair is made up—and the funding that is made available to all relevant participants are vital for justice to be seen to be done, and we cannot cut corners on any of those things. There is widespread concern across the United Kingdom about the circumstances surrounding this fire, and all our constituents, but particularly the people local to this fire, need to be satisfied that justice is done and seen to be done.

2.44 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): The House struggles on occasions such as this to get the tone of the debate right. When Members of this place awoke on 14 June, we were all horrified by what we witnessed. How on earth the residents are coping with this tragedy, I just do not know.

I pay immediate tribute to the local Member of Parliament, the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). She has not been here very long, but in no time at all she has done her very best to support local residents. So I congratulate her, and I think that the House will come together at least on that point.

There are no words that are adequate to describe our feelings about this horror. The fire started on the fourth floor at one in the morning, when most of the residents were asleep. Within half an hour, a towering inferno took place. It was truly shocking to turn on our TV screens in the morning and see what had happened. This was just a month ago.

This House has a huge responsibility in terms of how we deal with this matter in the debate, and the tone must be moderate. Recently, an article was written by Nick Ross. He is not someone I know personally, but he appears on TV as a commentator. He said:

“no one has a right to a monopoly on anger, or grief...For 15 years I have been campaigning to update building regulations in England to improve fire safety and to have sprinklers fitted routinely to council and other social housing, and I can't recall a single Government minister or Opposition frontbencher—Labour, Conservative or Lib Dem—who ever campaigned with us...Three times I've addressed the Local Government Association...pointing out how the risks are disproportionate in subsidised housing—‘It's the poor wot gets the flame’—as three times they applauded and did nothing.”

Now, I come to my hon. Friend the Minister. Mr Ross continues:

“Ministers are mostly here today, gone tomorrow”, although I hope my hon. Friend will be around for a little time,

“and few would claim to be expert in their briefs. Except for those who know it all because they are gripped by rigid ideology, most ministers do listen to their advisers...If there is any group whose actions allowed the catastrophe to happen it was these advisers”, and Ministers took their advice.

Finally, Mr Ross says:

“Sprinklers are not invincible. They can't function if the water supply fails. But—and this is the truth that makes me so angry—no one ever dies from fire when a home is protected by automatic sprinklers. That's why in the U.S. they're installing 40 million a year.”

But let's not be persuaded that the risk is only in high-rise towers. There are 300-400 fire deaths a year and most victims live in low-rise properties.

We need sprinklers in all social housing, care homes, and multi-occupation premises including schools—and let's not forget our hospitals...There is a terrible anger after Grenfell. Instead of trading political insults we must put it to good use.”

We politicians are often criticised—we take the blame for most things that happen—and we have been criticised for not acting on this issue. However, that cannot be said of the all-party group on fire safety rescue, and I am delighted that a number of its very active members are present. Unfortunately, we lost one or two members in the last election, but the group has been going for a long time. I do not know whether colleagues here today are experts, although we found out this morning that one newly elected Scottish Conservative Member is a former firefighter, and he will no doubt bring his expertise to this. Most of us are not experts, however, and since 1986 the APPG has depended on two marvellous secretaries. First we had Douglas Smith, and then, in 2013, Ronnie King took over. Time after time—as was mentioned earlier by the group's vice-chairman, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—we asked Ministers to look at the Lakanal House recommendation about the retrofitting of sprinklers, and we asked for the building regulations to be reviewed after 11 years.

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who I think will be replying to the debate, has already met members of the all-party parliamentary group, and this morning it was agreed that I should put a number of points to him, which I hope he will consider. They are as follows.

“Without prejudice to the public inquiry or the police criminal investigation, the all-party group...want to respond to the Secretary of State's invitation to submit measures which can be put in place immediately to keep people safe”.

I entirely accept the frustration felt by Opposition Members who feel that something needs to be done now, and that we need not wait until the outcome of the public inquiry for that to happen. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will reflect on that.

The APPG said:

“One such measure is to commence the long promised review of Approved Document ‘B’ to the Building Regulations, forthwith, and in particular to seek an immediate reinstatement of the provisions of Section 20 of the London Building Acts insofar as they are required a one hour fire resistance to outside walls of blocks of flats”.

It is crazy that we no longer have those regulations. The Minister will face a test: he will be given advice on the matter, and I hope that, unless it is in the affirmative, he will make his own decision and will agree with the recommendation from the all-party parliamentary group.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My hon. Friend obviously understands these things better than I do, but one thing has really worried me about this tragedy. If there had been sprinklers inside the building, and the outside of the building had caught fire, would people have survived although the outside of the building was aflame? That worries me. I do not know whether there is an answer, but it seems to me that they might have survived.

Sir David Amess: That is an interesting point. All I will say is that people do not lose their lives when sprinklers have been fitted. That is the point.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does it not speak volumes that in 2007 we said that every new building should have a sprinkler system?

Sir David Amess: I will come to that point, but I also want the Minister to hear this, because it is not the responsibility of his Department. It is crazy that it is not mandatory for all new school buildings to have sprinklers fitted. We must address that, as a matter of urgency. Again, I hope that, if the Minister is not given the advice that I certainly want him to be given, he will make a contrary decision and recommend that all new school buildings have sprinklers fitted.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman has said about sprinkler systems in schools, but does he agree that it is also imperative for the regulations to be changed to cover student accommodation? I understand that tower blocks more than 30 metres high will now be fitted with sprinklers, but that student accommodation more than 30 metres high will not qualify. I hope my hon. Friend agrees that that cannot be right.

Sir David Amess: I certainly do agree. The Minister has heard what has been said. I understood that every building more than 30 metres high would have to have sprinklers fitted. I hope that at some stage when the Minister is winding up a note will be passed to determine whether or not the hon. Gentleman—he was at our meeting this morning—is right, but as far as I understand, that cannot be the position.

The APPG also agreed on the following:

“without prejudice to the public inquiry or the police criminal investigation, the all-party group...wish to support the recommendation of the coroners at Southwark and Southampton arising from the Lakanal House and Shirley Towers tower block”—which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey)—

“whereby both coroners recommended in a letter to the Secretary of State that the Department for Communities & Local Government, encourages providers of housing in high risk residential buildings containing multiple domestic premises to consider the retrofitting of sprinkler systems”.

I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will deal with that as well.

The APPG said:

“a letter to the then CLG Minister, dated 1st May 2014...drew the Minister’s attention to”

Ronnie King’s

“personal involvement with the Lakanal House Coroner’s Inquest, where clarification was given from the Department that the current Building Regulations allowed the composite panels under the external wall window sets of such tower blocks not to have any fire resistance”

—that is absolutely crazy—

“and that this weakness in the Regulations remains uncorrected today; despite the upward spread of fire which occurred, resulting in the deaths of six people.”

(Under the current Building Regulations guidance Approved Document B, the external walls of Tower Blocks need only have a classification “O” Surface spread of Flame, with no fire resistance”).

The House would not expect the Minister to be an expert on all these matters, and he will have to take advice from somewhere, but I hope he understands the frustration that has been caused by the ignoring of the APPG’s recommendations. This fire should never have happened, and it would not have happened if notice had been taken of our recommendations.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service—who is not in the Chamber at present—said:

“we are maybe looking at a system failure, built up over many years, which we now have to address urgently...over many years and perhaps against the backdrop of, as data shows, a reduced risk in terms of fire, in terms of number of incidents and deaths...maybe as a system some complacency has crept in.”

Well, it certainly has not “crept in” as far as the APPG is concerned.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I understand that the Fire Brigades Union has talked a great deal about the cuts in services and about deregulation, and the hon. Gentleman has talked a great deal about sprinklers today. Does he agree that the cuts and what has happened to the fire regulations cannot have failed to have an impact, and that they happened on the Conservatives’ watch? Let me add that I am a bit disappointed to see how many Conservatives are missing from this debate. It is a crucial debate, and Conservative Members should be here.

Sir David Amess: I know the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, and I shall be meeting him shortly to hear in more detail precisely what his criticisms are. I can assure the hon. Lady that the APPG will raise any issues that the union mentions to us. As for attendance on the Conservative Benches, in time the hon. Lady will have a view on attendance in the House. A long time ago, all the Benches were packed. I can only say that I regret that that is not the case on this occasion. Given that the general public can see our proceedings on the parliamentary channel, it is always disappointing when the Chamber is not packed, but I am afraid that, in recent years, that has been the trend.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Fire Brigades Union should have core participant status in the inquiry?

Sir David Amess: The Minister will have heard what the hon. Lady has said. I cannot believe that there will not be very close involvement. I do not want to trip myself up if there has already been a discussion about the matter, but I certainly do not see why there cannot be real participation in the inquiry. Perhaps the Minister will take up the point when he responds.

Finally, I want to highlight three points to my hon. Friend the Minister. The first is that building regulations no longer include a requirement for one-hour fire resistance for outside walls, as was the case under the London Building Acts. That has got to be corrected. Firefighters were horrified by the way this disaster took place. The second point relates to the testing of cladding. It costs £10,000 to fire-test a 30-metre cladded wall. Most testing is done on the desktop, which does not take into account materials used underneath or between cladding, such as

[*Sir David Amess*]

wood. I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will look at that point. The last point is about the retrofitting of sprinklers over the past year: in 100% of cases where sprinklers have been activated, they have controlled or extinguished the fire. I welcome the fact that there is a public inquiry, but I again ask my hon. Friend the Minister not only to listen to the recommendations of the all-party group, but to act on them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have plenty of time for this debate. A lot of people wish to take part in it, and I should tell the House that I have had notifications from several new Members wishing to make their maiden speeches. I would like to manage without a formal time limit; especially for the benefit of those making their maiden speech, it is much better not to have a time limit. We can manage that if people, showing some self-restraint and some thought for their fellow Members, speak for about nine minutes. That means calculating on the basis of 10 minutes and then stopping a bit earlier. It is amazing how difficult people find it to do the arithmetic once they are on their feet, but I will try to help them. If we keep to about nine minutes, everyone will have an opportunity to speak without a formal time limit, and I know that I can rely on Mr Clive Betts to do this perfectly.

3.2 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): This is the most appalling tragedy. I am sure that our hearts go out to the friends and families of everyone who lost their lives, to everyone who has been traumatised by this appalling event, and to everyone who has been displaced and is now homeless. The only good that can come out of this is that we learn lessons quickly about what happened and make sure it never happens again.

On the practicalities, I first want to address the issue of funding to put right the tower blocks up and down the country that are now deemed to be failures and in non-safe situations. I was worried by the conditions that the First Secretary of State put on the funding that might be available. When challenged, he initially said that of course the Government would fund any safety work that the local fire authority deemed necessary, but he then withdrew that statement and said that the Government would fund such work when the local authority could not afford to do it, which is a very important condition. Will the Minister explain precisely what that means, what criteria will lead to Government funding, and if local authorities will be asked to find funding for themselves?

We must see this in the context of local authority finances as a whole—not merely in relation to the cuts to local authority budgets, but in the light of the fact that this work on social housing will come out of not the general fund, but the housing revenue account. In 2010, funding for social housing was cut by more than any other form of expenditure—by 60%. There is not a penny of Government money in the current spending round for new social housing, decent homes work or any remedial work on social housing. Local authorities have been asked to find the money all by themselves.

Ms Buck: Is it my hon. Friend's understanding that any works at the local level will, in effect, be paid for by tenants out of their rents and by leaseholder contributions? Does he agree that the basic repairs and maintenance budgets for local authority social housing have already been cut by 20% since 2010?

Mr Betts: Absolutely—that is precisely the point I was coming on to make. The money will come out of the housing revenue account, which is, of course, funded from rents. In the 2015 Budget, the Government decided that rents would not rise by CPI plus 1%, but would actually fall by 1% per year. It is estimated that that will have a massive effect, with many billions of pounds less—about £40 billion over 30 years—coming into housing revenue accounts. Councils can, of course, borrow money, but the amount is capped by the Government.

When the Government cap rents and borrowing, where can local authorities go to find the money to show, in the Minister's terms, that they can afford to do this work? All they can do is to cut other planned expenditure for the maintenance of social housing. Solving one problem will simply lead to other problems unless the Government are prepared to find the money. It is as simple as that, and I hope the Minister will reflect on this very seriously. Local authorities should not have to show either that they will not build a few social houses that they were going to build, or that they will cut maintenance programmes so that they can prove that they can afford to provide extra money for the necessary work on tower blocks. Instead, the Government should say that all the necessary work approved by local fire authorities to make tower blocks safe will be eligible for extra Government money. It is a very simple request, and if the Minister could say yes, he would resolve an awful lot of concerns and difficulties in this debate.

In a slightly wider context, we simply must start to view social housing differently. There has been a tendency in the past few years to see social housing as poor housing for poor people, and to think that anything will do for the people who live there. I have to tell Ministers that that is somewhat reflected in the pay to stay scheme. Fortunately, the Government have recently made the scheme voluntary for social housing landlords, not compulsory. In other words, there is a view that those who can afford it—slightly better-off tenants—should not be in social housing. I disagree: social housing should be there for those who need it.

Such thinking is also reflected in the proposal to sell high-value council assets. In other words, there is a view that if council housing is good and decent, it should not be council housing any longer. That is wrong as well. The proposal to fund the right to buy for housing association tenants seems to have been put on the back burner. Again, the Minister could address that by saying that we will have good-quality social housing in the future that will remain as social housing for those who need it.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily good case and I hope that the Minister will respond to his points. May I add an additional point? When social affordable housing is used for tenants who have been decanted—in the case of Grenfell or, indeed, of other examples—such housing also needs to be replaced, because otherwise we will again be looking at a net loss of social housing.

Mr Betts: My hon. Friend makes an extremely powerful point. Not merely should the Government fund the remedial work on tower blocks but, in the Grenfell case, they should fund the replacement of social housing to make sure people do not lose out.

There has been a call for an immediate review of the fire regulations, and the Minister could announce today that the Government will get on with that. I hope that whoever is elected as Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee today will take a lead, with its new elected members, by getting the Select Committee involved, just as we were in relation to regulations for gas and electrical safety in the home.

Getting Ministers to agree to new regulations has, at times, been a bit like drawing teeth. I draw attention to the Select Committee hearing in 2013 at which Peter Holland, the new chief fire and rescue adviser, and the then Minister were questioned very strongly about the mandatory retrofitting of sprinklers. The then Minister said no to that, and one of the reasons given—it was also given in a Westminster Hall debate—was that we could not have a new regulation unless two old ones were taken off the statute book. What a nonsensical position! Regulations are either necessary or they are not. If regulations are necessary to keep people safe, they should be implemented without having to wait for two others to be cancelled. I hope Ministers will act rapidly, and I am pleased that my local authority in Sheffield has decided to retrofit sprinklers to all its tower blocks in advance of any Government statement.

Colleagues have made the point that cladding should not be fire-tested in isolation. The insulation, the firestops, the fire doors and all other aspects of tower blocks' fire safety systems must be tested. Sheffield, working with the fire service, has so far found only one block where the cladding has failed—the Hanover tower block in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). However, the fire service has said that because of everything else that is in place in that block, it still believes its fire systems make it safe for people to live there.

Sheffield City Council has done very well. It has written to the fire authority and all the tenants. It has held meetings with them and said that if anyone wants to move temporarily because they feel unsafe, they can do so. It has also put a 24-hour fire watch in the block. But in the end, the fire authority believes that the block is safe because of how the cladding works with the insulation, the firestops and everything else. I hope that Ministers will now look at extending the tests beyond cladding to whole fire prevention systems in blocks, and encouraging local authorities to do the same.

Finally, will the Minister explain why there is to be a taskforce in Kensington and Chelsea and not commissioners? As I said the other day, I believe, as a localist, that commissioners should be used only in extremis, but this is an extreme example of a failure of governance.

Mike Kane: This point has not been raised so far in the debate. I am a Greater Manchester MP, and there was a first-class contingencies response after the Ariana Grande incident in Manchester. What does my hon. Friend think of the council's civil contingencies response after the Grenfell Tower incident?

Mr Betts: I think that the council itself and the Government have admitted that the response was not adequate.

I ask the Minister why there are not to be commissioners. The explanation has been that the taskforce will report to the Secretary of State, but it will not have executive powers. I say to him that this is a recipe for another disaster. When there are mixed lines of accountability and no one is sure who has executive power, that is exactly when things go wrong, because no one is sure who is responsible, everyone leaves things to everyone else and, when something happens, everyone blames everyone else. I ask that we please learn the lessons. Can we have an explanation of why commissioners have not been put in place? It seems to me that the Minister could have acted quickly, but now we have confusion rather than clarity.

3.12 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I assure the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that if he wins the chairmanship of the Communities and Local Government Committee by one vote, it will have been mine, and he is welcome to it.

On a more serious note, I would like to declare an interest. As is set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I am an unremunerated director of 3SFire Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of Hampshire fire and rescue authority and a local authority trading company created to help to fill the gap left by the shrinking Government grant for the Hampshire fire and rescue service. 3SFire returns all profits to the fire and rescue authority, and all the directors are unremunerated.

On 6 April 2010, a fire broke out on the ninth floor of Shirley Towers in Southampton. I attended as chairman of the Hampshire fire and rescue authority as crews battled the fire. That fire was brought under control and 100 people were rescued on the night, but at a great cost. Two firefighters who entered the tower block to rescue residents died after becoming entangled in falling electricity cables. They lost their lives while trying to save others. Those two firefighters, Alan Bannon and Jim Shears, demonstrated the very best of our emergency services, and they are still very much missed by everyone who knew them.

The fire in Shirley Towers happened in 2010. The inquest concluded in 2012, and the coroner issued his letter in April 2013. In that letter he recommended—some of this has been said, but I will repeat it, because I think it is important—

“Social housing providers should be encouraged to consider the retro-fitting of sprinklers in all existing high rise buildings in excess of 30 metres in height, particularly those identified by Fire and Rescue Services as having complex designs that make fire-fighting more hazardous and/or difficult.”

After the coroner made his recommendations, Southampton City Council committed to retrofit sprinklers in three high-rise tower blocks. However, as the weeks and months passed, there was no move to carry out the work. I asked the council about it over and over again, and was always given assurances that a report was about to be written or that funds were being made available, but nothing actually happened. Months and years passed, but then finally, in February 2015, Southampton City Council approved a cabinet report saying that it would commit £1 million of housing revenue account money

[*Royston Smith*]

to retrofit three blocks: Shirley Towers, where the fire happened; Sturminster House; and Albion Towers in my constituency.

Two and a half years after the council agreed that report and allocated the funds, those sprinklers are still not installed. Coincidentally—the Labour cabinet member with responsibility for housing in Southampton has assured me that it is a coincidence—the sprinklers that the city promised more than two years ago for some of the most vulnerable blocks will soon be fitted. That is, at least, what I have been told.

The Leader of the Opposition will be visiting Southampton on Saturday. I hope that while he is there, he will ask the leader of the Labour-controlled council, who was also the Labour candidate in the general election, why he has not acted on the coroner's recommendations and carried out the retrofitting of sprinklers in the city's high-rise flats. I hope that the Leader of the Opposition will also explain to residents of those towers why he and his shadow Chancellor have sought to politicise the tragedy of Grenfell Tower, but have remained silent about Labour-controlled Southampton's failure to act on the coroner's recommendations, despite its promise to residents that it would do so. I am confident—or, more likely, hopeful—that seven years after the Shirley Towers fire, Southampton City Council will retrofit sprinklers in our tower blocks.

I recount these events not for political point scoring—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members may laugh, but that is what they have done from the day of the tragic event at Grenfell Tower. I have not tried to score political points in the way that Labour has sought to do, but for a really important reason. When the inquiry into the Grenfell tragedy has concluded and we know what happened, and how and why it happened, the recommendations flowing from that inquiry must be accepted. The Government must act on those recommendations and not allow the situation to drift for year after year in the way that has been allowed to happen in Southampton. In the years since Shirley Towers there have been dozens of fires in Southampton's tower blocks, and if one of those had turned out like Grenfell or Shirley Towers, there would have been no excuse and nowhere for the local authority to hide.

Andy Slaughter: The hon. Gentleman's case might be more convincing if he did not see everything from one particular vantage point. He says that there must be action after the public inquiry, but does he not agree that action should have been taken in the light of what happened at Lakanal House? Can he perhaps explain why Ministers did not make recommendations about retrofitting sprinklers after that, despite what the coroner said in his letter? [HON. MEMBERS: "We did."] No, you did not.

Royston Smith: As I understand it, and as I said, there was a recommendation that the use of sprinklers should be encouraged. The difference between Southampton and the local authority in the Lakanal case is that Southampton committed to that retrofitting but did not do it.

As I said, if one of the dozens of fires in tower blocks in Southampton since Shirley Towers had turned out like that fire or Grenfell, there would have been nowhere

to hide. If the Government fail to act on the findings of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, we will have nowhere to hide either, and the public will never forgive us.

3.19 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to address the House and make my maiden speech, and as a London MP I am grateful for the chance to speak in the debate about the tragedy of Grenfell Tower.

It is an honour and a privilege to be elected to represent Lewisham West and Penge, the area that I love. I was raised and went to primary school in Sydenham, and I went to secondary school in Penge. I am now raising my own family there and I am proud to call it home.

Growing up, if anyone had told me that I would go on to become the Member of Parliament for my area, I would have laughed. Society never seemed to have much aspiration for girls from Cator Park School, and all too often we were written off, but I am here, and my sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), is here, so as my former English teacher said during the general election campaign, Cator Park now has almost as many alumni in this place as Eton.

Our constituency is a collection of strong south-east London communities around Forest Hill, Bellingham, Perry Vale and Sydenham, within Lewisham. Since 2010, it has taken in the bustle of Penge High Street, the suburban calm of Clock House and the splendour of Crystal Palace park, including its legendary dinosaurs.

I am the 12th Member to serve either Lewisham West and Penge or Lewisham West, as it was before 2010. I feel privileged to be the first woman to represent it, 99 years after it was created, in the same year as the Representation of the People Act and the first election in which women could vote. My predecessor Jim Dowd represented the constituency for 25 years and devoted more than 40 years of his life to public service, both in this House and on Lewisham Council. A lifelong resident of SE23, Jim stood up for our local services and good jobs, and he represented his constituents with conviction on national issues. He held a range of positions both in government and opposition, and effectively used his position to further causes that were important to him, especially animals, which he loved, and their welfare. Even his general election literature from 2015 included a picture of him shaking hands with a giant cat.

Previously a bellwether seat, Jim and those who helped to run the local party have helped to turn Lewisham West and Penge into a strong Labour seat, while never taking anything for granted. It is in part thanks to them and their hard work that I am able to stand here now as their representative in Parliament. Jim has been a good friend to me and my family. His support has been immeasurable, and I know that he will be greatly missed in this place.

The enormous loss of life at Grenfell Tower and the preventable tragedy of what happened there have cast a shadow over the first few weeks of this Parliament. Hearing stories of the events that night, it was hard to hold back tears. The unimaginable horror of a mother throwing a baby from a 10th-floor window still haunts me.

The inquiry must now happen quickly, transparently and with the full inclusion of the victims, but what seems clear to me is that what happened at Grenfell Tower and then in the aftermath are symptomatic of a system that is broken; a system that neglects the poor and vulnerable; a system in which cost-effectiveness seems to have been put before health and safety; and a system that I have come to this place to change.

Around the time that Jim was making his maiden speech, I was at secondary school in the constituency. Growing up in the '80s and '90s, we had lessons in huts, class sizes of 35, and not enough books to go around. As the daughter of two teachers, I knew that teachers were undervalued and underpaid. My parents are here today, and I am thankful for the values and the support that they have given me.

It was my experiences, growing up, that made me want to stand up and fight to end inequality, and to make sure that every child gets the best chance in life, no matter what their wealth or background. I am saddened to say that all schools in my constituency face funding cuts, and our wonderful boys' comprehensive, Forest Hill School, is £1.3 million in deficit. I made a promise to my constituents that I would fight hard for our schools and our young people, and that is exactly what I will do.

Another issue that I want to fight for in this place is defending workplace rights. Before entering Parliament, I was an employment rights lawyer for more than a decade, representing working people day in, day out. I know at first hand how many of our employment rights come from Europe, such as paid holiday, limits on working time and many of our discrimination laws. I will fight tooth and nail to prevent any compromise of those rights as we negotiate Britain's exit from the European Union, but we need to go further than that and create a secure workplace and decent wages by banning zero-hours contracts and raising the national minimum wage. I was at a food bank in my constituency on Friday, and it is an absolute travesty that people are having to choose between feeding their children and feeding themselves.

An issue close to my heart is maternity discrimination. After the birth of my son, I set up a business to provide advice on pregnancy discrimination and flexible working to mums and families. I want to work to ensure that all jobs are flexible by default, and that all parents can take parental leave without fearing discrimination or the loss of their job.

I believe that a first-rate education, excellent healthcare, decent housing and proper employment rights are essential to the prosperity of us all. Rather than condemn our constituents to a race to the bottom, we must offer them hope and collectively ensure that our country is able to thrive, advance and progress, while no one is left behind.

3.26 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on such a powerful and articulate maiden speech? It is clear that she will be a forceful and effective advocate for her constituents. Her sister, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who is sitting behind her, her parents, who are sitting in the Public Gallery, and her constituents, who are watching on TV, can all be proud.

I will say a few words about the public inquiry into this dreadful tragedy. At the risk of stating the obvious, it is of course vital that the inquiry is carried out with absolute impartiality and without fear or favour, and is motivated by a dogged determination to get to the truth, wherever it may lie and however convenient or inconvenient it may be. It is precisely because of those fundamental principles that I think Sir Martin Moore-Bick is the right man for the job, notwithstanding comments that have been made.

Let me be clear: I do not know Sir Martin from Adam. I have never met him, but I know the Court of Appeal, where he served with great distinction, and I have appeared there as an advocate on more occasions than I care to remember, and I can say with my hand on my heart that it is a jewel of the British constitution. In that body reside some of the most brilliant brains to be found anywhere in our country, and perhaps more importantly, that academic distinction is allied with absolute and ferocious independence. I am sorry to say that I have lost there far more times than I have won, but the most powerful tribute that I can pay to the Court of Appeal is that I have always left it understanding the judges' reasons and acknowledging the consummate fairness and integrity that they have brought to the process.

That is why I want to address a troubling insinuation that may be being made: that as an educated man with a title, Sir Martin is somehow ineligible for this job. Let me be clear that in our system of law, no one gets to his position by being nice to the Government. They get to it, more often than not, by being a nuisance—by holding the Government back when they overreach themselves, and by holding them fiercely to account—because the legal culture in this country is that the greatest accolade that can be paid to a judge is that he or she is fair. The Court of Appeal has that in spades; Sir Martin has that in spades. We owe it to the victims to let him get on with the job.

3.29 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): May I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves)? She made an eloquent speech and is clearly going to fill the shoes of her predecessor. He was one of the more outstanding Members on the Labour Back Benches and will be remembered for many reasons, not all them to do with his approach to parliamentary debate, which we will all remember with affection. He was a forthright advocate on behalf of his constituents, and I can remember with a great deal of affection when he was my Whip too—we finished on good terms.

I associate myself with all the comments made about the first responders and the emergency services, about the officers of Kensington and Chelsea Council who went above and beyond the call of duty to try to respond to the needs of local people—it is sometimes overlooked that there were individuals who did an enormous amount of work; we need to recognise that—and, of course, about those affected by the tragedy.

The response exposed a complete failure on the part of Government, right the way to local government. It also exposed the fact that when local authorities reduce their manpower resources and the services they provide, and when they are so thin that they cannot respond in

[*Clive Efford*]

such circumstances, it is clear that we are going too far with reductions in investment in what is needed to support local communities. There is more to a council than a posh town hall; it is what is in it that counts. When a council prides itself on being able to give a £100 council tax rebate in the run-up to local elections, it leaves itself with few resources with which to respond in such circumstances. When that council takes what has to be described as a minimalist approach to providing and backing up those services and when it prides itself, first and foremost, on how little it spends, it is no wonder that there is no resilience when such a tragedy happens.

This is a tragedy that would have overwhelmed any local authority. The demand on local resources was huge, and any council would have needed the assistance of other local authorities to step in and support them, so one of the questions for the inquiry has to be: why, when those offers of help were made in the first 24 hours, did Kensington and Chelsea Council not respond to them? My local authority has been dealing with the concerns of local residents living in tower blocks, who want to know that they are safe, and using its communications and its housing officers and councillors to go out and talk to residents to reassure them, and to carry out the fire safety checks and everything else. At the same time it has been providing support to Kensington and Chelsea. It is quite clear from the response to those offers of help that there was something fundamentally wrong at the heart of Kensington and Chelsea. I pay tribute to those in the local community who spontaneously got together and responded to the needs of local people.

There are some lessons that we could have learned along the way, as the chair of the all-party group on fire safety rescue mentioned, and not just from Lakanal House. There have been incidents in other countries where exactly the same type of aluminium cladding caused the rapid spread of fires. The photographs of one that took place in 2014 in Melbourne, Australia—they are on the internet and were in the media at the time—look almost identical to those of the fire that took place at Grenfell Tower. What is surprising is that it is clear from talking to experts in the field—fire safety officers and others—that they knew the significance of that fire and the lessons that should have been learned about this type of cladding at the time. It is remarkable that there seems to have been no knowledge of that on the part of the Government or any review of the materials used for tower blocks at that time, because other countries did take action. They took steps to ban this type of cladding from being used on tower blocks.

There are questions to be asked. In the Lacrosse tower case in Melbourne, there was a sprinkler system in place, and some 500 people were evacuated from that block. No one died; they got out safely because a sprinkler system was in place. In some areas in that building the sprinkler system was overcome by the fire, but it was still sufficient to keep the fire from spreading within the building, thereby enabling people to leave. This question has to be asked: why have the Government not been learning these lessons along the way, not just from Lakanal, but from other fires that are clearly sending a message about the types of materials we use on these tower blocks? I want the inquiry to look into that.

Some countries take steps to limit the number of people who can live at height above a certain floor in tower blocks of specific designs. I also ask the inquiry to look into that. Do we need to have regulations in place to try to limit the number of people who live in tower blocks at height? This, again, was an issue in the Melbourne fire; because of shortages of housing and housing costs, so many people were crammed into the units in that tower block. Do we need to have a fire regulation on this? I ask the inquiry to look into that, too.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): When I met Sheffield local authority, it expressed concerns about the safety of not only tower block residents but individuals living in flats above takeaways and other commercial premises, which often share the same staircase, bathroom and kitchen as the commercial premises and often are very overcrowded—for example, with illegal immigrants sharing beds. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look into the possibility of having regulations in this area?

Clive Efford: I entirely agree. We need to look at that, as in another situation the numbers of people in a block could become an issue—and we do not know that that was not an issue in this instance as well.

The inquiry must also look at the issue raised by the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), about building control. There are a number of issues about enforcement and making regular checks on the work done when refurbishments take place. Are the fire blocks being put in place between the floors, for instance? The advice to me from a constituent of mine who is an expert and who has been in the media speaking about this case, and about this issue for many years, is that we are very lax about the enforcement of the fire blocks between the floors and around windows, and we need to ensure that there is proper enforcement of this. The inquiry must look into that, too.

Responsibility for appointing the building control must lie with the local authority. There must be clear lines of responsibility for maintaining these standards, and we must stop local authorities being side-lined over ensuring that safety standards are considered of the utmost importance when these schemes go ahead.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a scandal that no minimum qualifications are required to become a building control practitioner, and does he agree that we need urgent action on this?

Clive Efford: Yes, an incident such as this one shows that there must be a basic knowledge of fire safety regulations, and there are many other issues that building control has to cover, so of course there must be a minimum qualification requirement.

The current position on sprinklers makes no sense. New blocks built to new building standards over 30 metres high are required to have a sprinkler system installed. However, older buildings built to an older standard of building control are not required to retrofit. That is completely and utterly illogical. The Government—outside of the inquiry and everything else—must fund the retrofitting of sprinklers in those blocks of flats where

that has been recommended by fire safety officers. There can be no equivocating on that. This fire shows that that is essential, and the Government should just accept that we cannot hold back on it any longer.

We are told that there was a plan to put fireproof cladding on to Grenfell Tower but that it was £2 per square metre more expensive than the cheaper version that was actually put on. If that is correct, the inquiry will obviously have something to say about it. There are some questions here. As I have said, this cheaper type of cladding was already on other blocks where similar fires had taken place. Why was it allowed to be used on this block? Is it true that the contractors who were erecting the cladding raised concerns about whether they should be putting that cladding on that block at that height? If it is true, action must obviously be taken against the people who made that decision.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Efford: I will not, because I am taking up some time and I want to sit down. I have had the nod from the Deputy Speaker, and if I do not sit down quite soon, I will not get called again.

My final question for the Minister is about the Building Regulations Advisory Committee. We were told that, in the light of the Lakanal report, that committee would meet to oversee fire regulations, but that meeting did not take place. The Minister said that that work would be completed by the end of this year, but the committee has not yet met. We need to hear from the Minister why, in the light of the report on Lakanal, that committee did not meet to review the fire regulations. In my opinion, this shows that the Government were asleep on the job. I hope that we will learn the lessons from this, once and for all, when the inquiry reports. Lakanal should have shown us the steps we needed to take to prevent this. Fires that have happened in other countries since Lakanal have pointed the way to the action that we should have taken. We have to learn the lessons once and for all to ensure that this type of tragedy never happens again.

3.43 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I should like to extend my congratulations to the new hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). It feels a bit strange to be welcoming you to the House when I have only just arrived here myself, but you made a wonderful speech and I look forward to working with you—I mean “her”; I am still learning the conventions myself.

I greatly enjoyed making my maiden speech, but it gives me no pleasure to stand before the House today to talk about this tragedy that has befallen our country. I am afraid that it will be one of those disasters that mark this period in our history and that we will remember for a long time to come. The Prime Minister has responded to it entirely appropriately by calling for a judge-led inquiry, and I was pleased that the shadow Secretary of State did not question the basis on which we intend to proceed. The Prime Minister went to the Lord Chief Justice and asked for a senior judge to be appointed and to proceed with an inquiry that will look into the immediate causes of the fire as well as the wider issues. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for

North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) said earlier, that will give the inquiry the opportunity to report in two or more stages, so that local residents can hear the issues that have immediately affected them while the inquiry goes on to consider the broader questions that affect communities and councils in many areas across the country.

It is with reference to those wider issues that I want to make some remarks, and I declare a sort of interest in that for a while I was on the board of Yarlinton Housing Group, a housing association in the west of England.

The first thing that struck me came from a BBC “Newsnight” investigation which suggested that developers may have used only desk-based research to persuade inspectors that the cladding was safe to use. If that is the case, serious questions must be answered following the tragedy, and we would want to know where else in the country that has happened.

The second thing is tenant feedback. If the reports are true that tenants had complained to the tenant management organisation about safety in the building and if those calls were not listened to, we need to know why. We need to know why the TMO was not picking up on the important feedback that only someone who lives in a building can give. I am not saying that had that feedback been listened to the fire would have been prevented, but without that feedback we can be certain that people in other buildings are being put at risk.

That brings me on to my next point: illegal sub-letting. It is a delicate, sensitive subject, and the Government have been absolutely right to announce an amnesty to encourage everyone to seek help and to come forward. Illegal sub-letting in our tower blocks and social housing discourages people from coming forward and reporting their concerns—it breaks that feedback. We all have to think of ways to ensure that people living in social housing can come forward and have their concerns heard.

My fourth point relates to something that I said in the House the other day, and it has been picked up on by a couple of other Members. What happened in Kensington and Chelsea prompts some serious questions about emergency and contingency planning in our local authorities. Just as some other authorities have used the cladding that seems to have been a major contributor to the fire, so other authorities may have emergency planning that leaves a lot to be desired. However, I was reassured by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that the Cabinet Office is already looking into that, and I am keen that that work is taken forward.

Before I sit down, I would like to reflect on something said by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). I am glad that we seem to be in agreement that we should have a judge-led inquiry. I was pleased that the shadow Secretary of State did not criticise Sir Martin, and I presume that he backs him in his role. Sir Martin is a highly respected judge and has achieved great things in his profession, dealing with extremely complex areas of law that will be relevant to this inquiry. That is an asset to the investigation, and we should all welcome that. His ability to do that work is not hampered by the colour of his skin or his social class. His skills have got him to where he is, and it is his skills that we should back. The inquiry will require some cool-headed thinking. It will not be helped by hot remarks that

[Alex Burghart]

suggest to the families that the victims were intentionally killed by people in government. It will not be helped by remarks that suggest that someone's impartiality is undermined by their social class. While we can debate its particulars, we all have a duty to get behind the inquiry and to encourage people who live in the area and in other tower blocks to come forward and be part of it.

3.49 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is a privilege to make my maiden speech, but it is sobering to do so in this debate on Grenfell, which reminds us all of the seriousness of our duties as Members of this House. I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who also made her maiden speech today.

I begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, Michael Dugher. The son of a railwayman, he has been true to his working class roots and a strong campaigner for Barnsley East on issues such as community pharmacies, Orgreave and brass bands. For all his achievements, he has been awarded the rare accolade of featuring on the wall of Strangers Bar—better the wall than the floor. Music is his passion, and now it is his job, as chief executive of UK Music. I know that family is important to him, and I wish him and Jo well in their new adventure. His predecessor, Jeff Ennis, has served as leader of Barnsley council and MP for Barnsley East, and is now mayor of Barnsley—a unique achievement.

Like Jeff, I was a teacher before entering this place. Working in education, I saw the profound power of learning, and I have learned myself that it is incumbent on all of us to support the next generation. I am particularly proud to be the first female MP for Barnsley East, but I would not be here without the help and encouragement of a former female Member, Sylvia Heal, who sat in your Chair for many years, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you will remember. I am delighted that she is here today, along with my parents. I am the daughter of a midwife and a care worker, and I owe them huge thanks for all their support.

For the past four years, I have been proud to fight for working people as an officer of the GMB trade union. As a Member of this House, I will continue that fight for working people, not least for the many trapped in jobs that are more precarious than ever before. Today's debate reminds us of what we have fought for over so many years, of how the lessons of the past are still as relevant today, and of how, even now, not all communities are equal and the protection of human life requires our action in this House.

Many people will know about Barnsley's history, and there is so much to be proud of, but still I have constituents waiting for justice for what happened to them at Orgreave in 1984. We must ensure that the Grenfell victims do not wait as long.

In Barnsley East, our industrial and cultural heritage runs alongside our history of working-class struggle. It is appropriate that the town is home to both the National Union of Mineworkers and the famous Grimethorpe Colliery band. Our communities were built on heavy industry—glass, steel and coal. Mining was a way of life

for entire communities. Some 30,000 people worked down the pits, and the impact of their loss is still felt today.

Many of my hon. Friends will know my constituency from the film "Brassed Off", which showed so powerfully the character, grit, humour, solidarity and struggle faced by honest, decent, hard-working people. No one who has seen the film can forget Danny's powerful speech when he says that nothing matters like people matter. It is traditional for Members to talk about the great history of their constituencies in a maiden speech, and I am very proud to do so, but nothing matters like people matter.

It is above all the people of Barnsley East who make the constituency what it is. People like the teaching assistant, her pay falling but her bills rising. She looks after our children; we should look after her. People like the insecure worker at a warehouse, labouring on the minimum wage. She works hard for her family; we should work just as hard for her. People like the veteran who served his country, yet is now homeless and jobless. He fought for us; we should fight for him. In Barnsley East we can be proud of our industry and our history. All of it matters, but none of it matters like people matter.

The NUM in Barnsley has a banner embroidered with the words, "The past we inherit, the future we build." I have spoken about our proud past, but the people of Barnsley East did not send me here to honour our history. They sent me here to build our future, and that is what I intend to do.

3.54 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): This is only the second opportunity I have had to make a speech in this Chamber, so when I look at those making their maiden speeches today, I think, "That was only me last week." The Labour party has so far not had the presence of mind to elect a female leader, yet having listened to the speeches of the hon. Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), I think it cannot be long until it does so. There is such an amazing proliferation of female talent in that party that I just cannot understand why they have not taken it over and occupied all the Front-Bench positions, with the greatest of respect to those men who occupy them at the moment. While it is an honour to follow both hon. Members, it is also unfortunate, because that will only demean my own performance.

I feel not only that I should declare some interests—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—but that I should present my CV. I am still the chair of the board of a housing association that has 20,000 homes in Walsall. I am also notionally, at least until the end of this month—it is not paying me at the moment, but I am still trying to help out—the assistant chief exec of YMCA in Birmingham, which has 300 units of accommodation for formerly homeless young people. I am also a member of the Chartered Institute of Building and a civil engineer by degree. That is relevant because of the points I feel that I need to make.

I have sat in a number of meetings as chair of the board of Walsall Housing Group, an association that is currently on site or in contract to build approximately 800 properties, some of which will be for shared ownership.

The need for that type of property across the UK is understood. Some of the properties will be available under the slightly more innovative rent to buy scheme, so there will be opportunities for different tenures of housing, funded by this Government. Perhaps the part of that Government funding I am most proud of is Homelessness Change funding, which is received by the YMCA and will allow us to provide much-needed modernisation for a 72-bed hostel in Northfield. This Government are investing in housing of various tenures.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) said that we will talk about the Grenfell tragedy for many years to come. It was a significant and tragic event. Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the Ronan Point disaster. Ivy Hodge lit a match to make a cup of tea, and the ensuing explosion, which was caused by gas leaking from a pipe to her cooker, blew her across the room and, more importantly, knocked out some supporting walls in her flat, which was on the fifth floor from the top. Not only did the explosion take out the supporting walls and damage all the flats above, but it led to catastrophic failure for all flats below, resulting in four people dying and devastation to the building.

Tests were subsequently done, and new structural supports were put in and the building was reoccupied. However, the consideration of the design criteria went on for years, with many people challenging complex issues such as wind loading, which was affected by whether or not the windows were open, and the building was taken down about 18 years later.

The point I am trying to make is that it is sometimes not easy to understand what has gone wrong. Speaking as somebody who has supervised the construction of these buildings and has been involved in their design, I know that designers invariably err on the side of caution.

Adam Afriyie: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and I very much value his experience in the building sector. Does he agree that often the devil is in the detail of the legislation, which uses terms such as “limited combustibility”? A definition of a precise standard for fire retardancy might be more useful. Perhaps there will be an opportunity for the inquiry to provide some recommendations along those lines so that everybody knows the exact standards that need to be met.

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend is right. Any opportunity for interpretation means that people have the chance to err either on the side of caution or, as some might suggest, on the side of cutting costs. The inclusion of that explicit detail would prevent such an opportunity for interpretation.

We will never be able to mitigate all risk, so it is incredibly important that we work with the fire service to minimise risk. I am grateful to Lee Sketchley from West Midlands fire service who came to see us at the YMCA. He inspected the hostel and we are acting on some of the recommendations for improvement that he made. That is relevant because of the stay-put policy, which has been mentioned. Its concept is built on the idea of compartmentalisation: if the whole fabric of the flat allows two hours’ exposure to fire before it penetrates, people can reasonably stay in that flat for a period, safe in the knowledge that somebody should be able to come and rescue them during that time. However, we will have

all seen—we will have seen it in this building during the warm weather—fire doors propped open, sometimes with fire extinguishers, ironically, but that renders the door useless in the event of a fire. Similarly, we will have seen fire doors that have been painted: the intumescent smoke-seal strip on the edge of the door will be affected by the paint, which will prevent it from serving its purpose if there is a fire.

I say to Members on both sides of the Chamber that we all have a responsibility. It is up to us to go back to the big housing providers in our constituencies and seek reassurances from them, individually, that they are sticking to the legislation that is already in place. Before we go looking for too much new legislation, let us at least make absolutely sure about that.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we also have a responsibility to provide adequate resources to our fire services? Let us also deal with staff morale, as the pay cap that has been imposed on our emergency services, including the fire service, is not helping matters at all.

Eddie Hughes: I am not sure that I can totally agree with the latter half of the hon. Gentleman’s point. I think the fire service’s response to the Grenfell tragedy was absolutely fantastic, as was that to the bombing of the Ariana Grande concert. The service that I personally have had from Lee Sketchley at West Midlands fire service has been absolutely fantastic. The fire service is clearly managing to deliver a first-class service with its current resources.

I end by simply saying: let us make absolutely sure that we understand that fire safety is everybody’s responsibility.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the hon. Gentleman is just about to finish his speech but, notwithstanding all his points about personal responsibility, and not painting fire doors or propping them open with fire extinguishers, people must be forgiven for leaving their windows open on a hot summer’s night only for flames to engulf their flats from the outside in.

Eddie Hughes: I could not agree more. We need to be certain that the design criteria we apply to these buildings mitigates that sort of circumstance.

4.3 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): At times of national disaster, poets laureate are often called on to commemorate and reflect on events. In north Kensington, we have our own Ben Jonsons and Alfred, Lord Tennysons. Our poets laureate are Akala, AJ Tracey, Lowkey and Peaky. We have Stormzy, and Potent Whisper calling out what he calls “Grenfell Britain” in gut-wrenching prose. We have poets and artists aplenty, but the Philistine council does not recognise their talent and would rather spend £30 million over 20 years on opera for a minority in Holland Park.

Why is all that relevant to this debate? Because for many years Kensington and Chelsea Council has misspent Government and council tax payers’ funds on countless vanity projects and handouts, as we have heard, while underfunding essential services such as nurseries, play centres, lunch clubs, homework clubs, youth centres,

[*Emma Dent Coad*]

advice centres, skills training and of course, as so tragically demonstrated, council housing. That is not to mention the recent controversial projects to hand our beautiful North Kensington library and neighbouring youth centre over to two private schools, at a cost to the council of £11 million, without even consulting the public, whose money is being used to fund private education. This is an £11 million gift to the private sector, while the council cannot find the money for sprinklers, decent cladding or fire alarms. Where is the accountability? To whom does Britain's favourite council report? Clearly, it is not to the taskforce.

As we have seen, and as has now been acknowledged, the council's response in the early hours and days after the fire was shockingly inadequate, and possibly even criminally neglectful; we shall see. So in the past four weeks, has it improved? Has the council learned from its mistakes? It has not. It has removed a chief executive and senior councillors have resigned, but who are replacing them? Where fundamental change is so desperately and clearly needed, we have had no change at all and a consolidation of the leadership that failed.

Survivors and volunteers are asking: where is the money so generously donated by the public? Where are the millions? Who is deciding where this money should go? Why is the council not using some of its reserves—near a third of a billion pounds—to purchase properties and support those whom it has so disgracefully failed? Has no one demanded that, after years of underspending revenue, money that has been shuffled into capital reserves for vanity projects be returned, quite properly, to those who need it? No one has. What is needed in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council is fundamental change, and I can see that we are not going to get it without further outside intervention and the support of people who can be trusted. The longer the situation prevails, the worse it will get. I am asking for intervention.

I get daily updates from people on the ground. Where is the wrap-around support for bereaved and desperate people who are still staying in hotels, as the much trumpeted “high-quality” temporary accommodation has been unsuitable or has not materialised at all? Why offer a survivor a high-rise flat? That happened this week. Why offer a disabled woman a home reachable only by stairs, where there is no lift? That happened this week. Why offer a flat in Pimlico, which is too far away for people to reach survivors’ networks? Where is the offer of temporary accommodation—

Adam Afriyie: I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady. Does she not accept that it should be for the people who are offered accommodation to choose whether to take it?

Emma Dent Coad: They have been offered one choice, so they have had no choice. It is that choice or the hotel. Normally, when someone is offered temporary accommodation, they have a choice of three or four places, and after that, they may be threatened with voluntary homelessness. On this occasion, they have been offered one each, so they have had no choice at all. All that happened this week, and I have direct communication with the people it happened to. Still no one is accountable.

More specifically on housing, can we please acknowledge that this process continues for many to be chaotic, daily? Why is a tenant management organisation that is under criminal investigation still in control of housing? The updates I get from survivors, members of voluntary groups and others directly involved in this project talk about a lack of cultural awareness among some social workers, and a lack of continuity of care. The issue of whether or not there is an amnesty where there are concerns about someone’s immigration status continues. I know what the situation is, but those involved certainly do not, as the communication is very poor.

Issues relating to the walks or finger blocks continue. Are these things safe? What about the fire exits? The issues about communication from the TMO, the confusion about the payment of rent, and the threatened eviction of people who have not paid may have been dealt with, but the legacy is still there. Does everyone know where they stand? It seems not. Some near neighbours in blocks are too scared to return, saying that they hear ghosts and screaming. As far as we can ascertain, survivors are given one choice of accommodation. Why only one? There should be a choice. One person turned down a flat with mould. Another turned down a flat scheduled for demolition. Is there no centralised list of decent available housing? There seems to be no co-ordination here. Somebody this week had offered three impeccably refurbished flats to the council, only to be told that everyone had been housed in high-quality homes, which we know is not true.

Frankly, this continuing disaster and lack of care and respect for survivors is unacceptable. It comes from a culture at Kensington and Chelsea Council that needs to be addressed—soon. The longer this goes on, the worse it is for survivors. Will the Government continue to let the council fail its survivors in so many ways? This is Potent Whisper’s Grenfell Britain.

Let me turn briefly to mental health. Many survivors are still in shock and cannot begin to recover until they can bury their loved ones. Many will have to wait a very long time for that. Many are fragile, and I have huge concerns for their mental health. I know people who are still in shock and not on any path to recovery. One was on the phone to her terrified best friend for over an hour, debating whether she should stay in the flat or try to leave. Then the phone went dead. The surviving friend calls and texts her friend every day, even though she knows that she is dead. Who is looking after her?

I am particularly concerned about those who may have mental health crises. There has already been one threatened suicide and one attempted suicide, and there may be more. We can be sure that many affected people will need urgent and intensive treatment at some point.

For many years, the minority party councillors in Kensington and Chelsea have been asking for an increase in the number of places of safety for people suffering crises. This followed a series of incidents in which people with mental health issues in sheltered housing had had crises and then ended up in a police cell overnight because there was nowhere else for them to go. Meanwhile, we hear that an entire ward at a London hospital is locked because there is not enough cash to keep it open. Patients are offloaded to private mental healthcare facilities at a cost of nearly £600 a day. Where is the logic in that, and who should be held accountable for it?

After four weeks, we are still witnessing a process that is reactive, not proactive. The council and the Government are one step behind. We need a sensible plan in place. We need to review that closed ward and allocate funds to staff it. Please can we have a proper strategic plan for housing and all the other issues? We are just reacting daily.

A lot of people and groups are beginning to plan for the future. Many come to me—many are well-meaning—and want me to tell them where they went wrong and how they can improve their approach or better serve their people. With my background in architecture and planning, I have lots of ideas, some of which I have been working on for years, but at a time when people feel so utterly betrayed and distrustful, I cannot possibly support any kind of top-down, outside intervention, however expert or well-meaning it is. At any time, but particularly at a time like this, good planning starts with the people whose lives will be changed by it. It starts with a blank sheet of paper, and should end in improving the lives of the people who live in the area, but often that does not happen. The estate development proposed by the council—and developments proposed by many councils of all political hues—is not for the benefit of existing tenants. We need a completely fresh approach. Overarching this is a genuine, often misplaced and sometimes insulting attitude that those in positions of power and influence know better than the “little people”, as some see them. I have never believed that, and perhaps that is why I was elected.

Members will have heard about our volunteer groups and organisations; they did not spring up from nowhere. They have always been there—always unappreciated and undervalued. They are amazing and self-organising. We need to learn lessons from them and bring them into the future.

What was so cruelly taken from our Grenfell people must be returned. They do not wish to be penalised financially forever for an act that they were not responsible for. They want their dignity back, and somewhere decent to mend and recover. We cannot return their deceased to life, but their families do want to bury something. They want the choice of where to bury their dead, and that has not always been offered.

This horrific event must be a game-changer. We need a thorough review of approaches to estate development and of the funding of social housing. We need to listen to the people affected and their warnings, and act on their concerns and priorities with the transparency and honesty that has so clearly been missing. Grenfell people do not want our pity or charity. They want their dues, they want justice, and they want change. Our poets and artists will continue to shame us all with their insight and intelligence until we recognise that, and accept their collaboration on the fundamental change that is so desperately needed.

4.14 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I welcome you to your place, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is humbling to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and her powerful words. What a difference it makes having a Labour MP in that constituency to speak up for the voiceless and those without power following this tragic incident.

Many of us still find ourselves unable to comprehend the shocking fire at Grenfell Tower—the tragedy that so perfectly captures our deep national, political and social crisis. The Grenfell fire is also a symbol of the systematic running down of institutions that we all need. Inevitably, as those systems begin to break down, the poor and vulnerable are the first in line to experience that failure.

We need high-quality journalism and a properly funded legal aid system that allows ordinary people their rightful protection under the law. We need properly paid public sector workers, and local government with the resources and power to do what is needed—not just act as a rubber stamp for Westminster. Of course, it is critical that today we focus on the detail of what went wrong at Grenfell, but I would also like to make two short points that argue for wider action—the kind of action that never ends.

The institutions that have a critical role in preventing disasters and clearing up the mess when things go wrong do not exist by accident. If they are run down, we reach the point where we—the lawmakers in this place—are daily exposing families and communities to unacceptable risks. When that happens, as it has for too long, we are culpable because we have pushed systems and people to the limit. I stand here today with friends on the Opposition side of the House to say that we will fight hard to end the relentless running down of multiple civic functions. No longer will that be done in our name. It looks to me as though the country is with us in that endeavour.

It is clear that both local authorities and the fire service were heavily relied on, both before the Grenfell tragedy and in dealing with the aftermath as it unfolded. So far there are only a few buildings of concern in Norwich, but a small and diminishing army of public sector and housing association workers doing their jobs day in, day out, with diminishing resources and morale, have had to deal with the fallout from Grenfell. Too often, those workers have too little power and too few resources to regulate the private sector in the public interest. Of the six blocks being tested for flammable cladding in Norwich, five are in the private sector.

What, for example, is being done to check privately owned student halls of residence? Will the Minister address the fact that many are now privately owned and managed? How can the Government and the universities ensure that such residences are checked for flammable cladding and that the highest safety standards apply? Can they confirm that student halls are classed as “other residential buildings” and are therefore subject to weaker requirements for sprinklers? If so, will the Government consider closing that loophole?

On a similar note, parents rely on their children being safe in our schools. The Government had been planning to change the regulations on fire safety in schools, removing the expectation that most new school buildings would be fitted with sprinklers, on the basis that school buildings do not need to be sprinkler-protected to achieve “a reasonable standard of life safety”—

the Government’s own words. Since the Grenfell fire, Ministers have hinted that those plans will rightly be abandoned. Can they make their position absolutely clear to the House?

[*Clive Lewis*]

Schools in Norwich are suffering particularly badly from Government cuts and are threatened with the worst settlement in Norfolk under the proposed funding formula, although we are waiting to find out whether and how that will ever be implemented. Can the Minister tell us whether any central funding will be made available for essential safety work, so that those schools do not face yet more unfunded costs from the Government?

I turn back to the local authorities, which have been subject to 1,000 unnatural shocks in funding and changes to their ways of working. To name but one, there is the Government's mandatory 1% rent reduction, which, at a stroke, reduces Norwich City Council's ability to repair and improve its ageing housing stock by an average of £7.4 million a year. What is the reality of that mandatory rent reduction? There is less investment in our council housing stock, and council activities such as the daily safety checks carried out on our high-rise blocks are put at risk. In Norwich, we are fortunate enough to have a Labour-run city council that makes sure that those safety checks happen, but like many other local authorities, my council is coming up against the physical limits of what it can do with its resources, which have been cut year after year by this Government.

It is not just our local authority that is struggling to maintain safe standards. Our fire services—the men and women whom we are rightly so quick to applaud for their bravery—also have concerns. Whole-time firefighters earn less than £30,000 a year, so the Labour party welcomes the fact that the 1% cap was not imposed on their new pay offer. But there is a catch. Given that there has been no confirmation of how this will be funded, firefighters are concerned that the money will come from the service itself. Borrowing from Peter to pay Paul will not improve anyone's safety. The Government must understand that the ongoing funding cuts to our institutions and to those who work so hard for them are critical parts of the Grenfell story. Reversing them is essential to prevent another tragedy.

4.20 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I am pleased to be making my maiden speech in such an important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on their contributions today.

I am deeply proud to have been elected as the first ever woman MP in Croydon. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Gavin Barwell, who served our town for seven years. Among the many good things he did was his work to introduce Lillian's law, following the tragic death of 14-year-old Lillian Groves in 2010. The law means that drivers can now be prosecuted if they are caught exceeding new drug limits. Since it was passed, there have been more than 13,000 convictions.

Gavin is also an acclaimed author. I understand that his book, “How to Win a Marginal Seat”, was much read among Conservative Members. I cannot wait for the sequel. I should also record my gratitude to the Prime Minister for giving me an early replay after my narrow defeat in 2015. I am so glad that I was able to repay the favour by helping her with her own staffing problems.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), who was the MP for Croydon Central for eight years, and the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who was the MP for the constituency for six years. I am delighted to be here with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), who is already a great champion of our town. I hope that two on the Opposition Benches will be better than one, and that we can truly stand up for Croydon.

I am privileged to have worked for two former Members of this House: the late Mo Mowlam, when she was a trailblazing shadow Northern Ireland Secretary; and as a civil servant for Tessa Jowell, when she was in charge of delivering the 2012 Olympics. They were both truly inspirational in completely different ways, and I am grateful to Tessa for the help she gave me during my recent campaign.

I am so proud to be part of a record number of women in this House, and particularly to be part of the women's parliamentary Labour party, which makes up 45% of Labour MPs. Just one more heave and we will be there. With the growing number of women and men from ethnic minorities, we are getting closer to looking like the country we represent. That is really significant for our democracy.

Croydon is deeply special to me. I have lived there all my life. Generations of my family were born and have died there. Most recently, my father died on 11 June this year, three days after the general election. He lived just long enough to see his daughter fulfil her goal, and to be proved right about my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). My father was a big fan of the Leader of the Opposition, so there is a good lesson for us all—listen to your dad.

Croydon is exceptional. The greenest and the largest of all the London boroughs, its diversity is its strength, from the woodlands of Shirley to the tower blocks of the town centre, and from the strong community of New Addington surrounded by fields to the Victorian terraces of South Norwood. Most agree that the name of our town derives from “crocus valley”, where, during the Roman period, crocuses were grown to make saffron to be sold as medicine on the streets of London. In the very heart of Croydon, we are growing crocuses again to make saffron. Our great theatre, Fairfield Halls, is being reborn through a multimillion pound makeover, and our art and culture are at the cutting edge, with artists from across the world literally painting our town with new art work. Our tech scene is the fastest growing in London, and we have the highest number of young people in London with nearly 100,000 in the whole borough. We are ambitious for Croydon, and I know that we will thrive.

But there are two sides to every tale. Seven years of austerity have ripped through our community: low pay, the horror that is the implementation of universal credit, cuts to disability benefits, high housing costs, rocketing homelessness, crippling cuts to local government, increasing knife crime, cuts to school funding, and young people starting out on their lives with debt.

We are letting people down if we do not, as a House, acknowledge the reality of the lives of those we are here to serve. I think many in this House are in complete denial about the scale of the problems we face. We are letting people down still more if we do not, with the

greatest energy and hunger for change, act in every way we can to make the lives of those we represent better, richer and more secure.

The Grenfell Tower fire showed just how extraordinarily our emergency services can respond at a time of great crisis, but it also shows how badly we get things wrong. On the Saturday after this disaster, I met a Croydon fireman who had been called to fight the Grenfell blaze just days earlier. There were tears in our eyes as he told me about the terrible things he had seen. He made me promise not to rest until we saw justice done. Today, as a House, I hope we can make a reality of that promise. It is clear that we failed too many people for too long. The victims were speaking, but we were not listening. We cannot make the same mistake again.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has suggested that we set up an advisory panel to help to build confidence and relations with local residents and survivors. That sounds very sensible. Shelter has said that it is not acceptable to expect residents to rely on written submissions only, and residents have clearly stated that the current timeline for submissions on the terms of reference is too short. That also seems sensible. But I wonder whether we also need to be brave enough to say, “We don’t have all the answers.” The whole point of listening is to listen and then to act. I would like us to be strong enough to commit to do that with the survivors and the local residents.

I am proud that Labour Croydon Council was the first council to commit to retrofitting all our high tower blocks with sprinklers. I call on the Government to clarify whether they will fund this, and all the other changes we need to make, and reverse the shocking cuts we have seen to local government. We cannot afford not to do this.

We must also view Grenfell in the wider context of a national housing crisis. Three figures tell the story. Right now, 76,000 families live in temporary accommodation—that is the best part of 120,000 children. Some 20% of our homes do not meet the Government’s decent homes standard—that includes fire safety. We also need to build 75,000 social rented homes a year; last year, we built fewer than 7,000.

I spoke to thousands of people on the doorstep in the election. Of course, there was nothing like on the scale of the horrors of Grenfell, but there were many experiences that led people to believe they had no voice. Having a voice is not about being able to speak out; it is about knowing you will be listened to and about being sure that action will be taken that makes a difference. Nowhere is that more important than in our response to the Grenfell Tower fire.

I said it was my goal to be the MP for Croydon Central. My ambition is not to be something, but to do something—to make a difference to the lives of the people I now represent. I do not underestimate the scale of that responsibility.

Many young people voted for me, just as young people voted in many other constituencies. There were many others who were voting for the very first time. They had perhaps never voted before because they felt politicians had nothing to offer. Now that they have put their faith in democracy—in us—for the first time, we must not fail them. If the election has

taught us anything, it is that we cannot take anyone for granted. As Croydon’s Stormzy put it so well in one of his songs,

“You’re never too big for the boot”.

When I am campaigning again in five years’ time—or even sooner—the true test for me will be that people tell me that I listened, I heard what they said, and I did my best to make a difference to their lives. I think that has to be the test for all of us on both sides of the House.

4.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a particular honour to follow three maiden speeches, all made by three new female Members. I made my maiden speech two weeks ago, so I am now speaking as a very experienced old timer. What particularly resonated with me was what the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said: people matter. That is very relevant to our debate today.

One month on from this tragedy, there is no less pain for the victims and their families, no less fear, and no less anger over the failings of the political system. The disaster at Grenfell Tower has left a huge scar, not just in the local community of Kensington, but across Britain. It has moved people deeply, whether they have local connections or not, and that has been reflected in the generosity shown by public donations. It has also exposed deep divisions and inequalities in our society which we have ignored for far too long. This disaster should have been avoided. How is it possible that, in a very wealthy borough like Kensington and Chelsea, dozens of people can burn to death in their own homes?

We now need to find out from the public inquiry exactly what happened and what mistakes were made, but reports that unsafe building materials were used, that the need to cut costs was put above tenants’ safety, and that concerns raised by the residents were repeatedly ignored paint a picture that goes much deeper than this disaster. It goes to the heart of our political system and its failures. Trust between our local communities and the political system has been seriously eroded, and must be restored.

Trust is a very precious thing which takes a long time to build. It is an essential part of a healthy democracy and a functioning society. It is vital that, in the work to restore lives affected by the Grenfell Tower fire, everything possible is done to rebuild that trust, which means genuinely listening to victims’ families and the local community, involving residents in the decisions that affect their lives and their future, and taking all possible action to put things right. That action must include an urgent increase in social housing provision throughout our country. The Grenfell Tower disaster was the result of a long-term failure of successive Governments to invest in social housing, in terms of both the quality and the number of homes. Leaving house building to the private sector has utterly failed. It has led to a housing crisis that has driven vast inequality and pushed many families into poverty and homelessness, and until we take radical action that crisis will continue to spiral out of control.

Furthermore, we need widespread reform of systems and structures. We need an immediate review of the building regulations to ensure that they are up to date and appropriate. We cannot wait for the results of the

[Wera Hobhouse]

public inquiry. We cannot have a repeat of what happened after the Lakanal House fire, when a review of regulations was promised but never delivered. This time, lessons must be learned and implemented fast.

Given that the fire started in a fridge, there must also be reform of electrical safety. My colleagues in both Houses have been fighting for a long time for the introduction of compulsory electrical safety checks in rented homes. So far the Government have seen that as an unnecessary regulation, but now it is surely inexcusable not to make a simple change that has the potential to save lives.

All residents in Britain, whatever type of housing they live in, have the right to live in homes that are safe, warm, and set in well-run, safe, green and clean neighbourhoods. This disaster has exposed huge weaknesses in the housing provision of our country, and has undermined people's trust. We all have a responsibility to rebuild trust between the public and their elected representatives, but the Government have the power to take radical steps to fix the system, and they must do that now.

4.33 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate you on your election, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make my first contribution to this honourable House by participating in today's debate, following the witty and on-point maiden speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). Before I do so, however, I want to speak briefly about my constituency. As anyone who has visited it could tell you, it is a place that defies easy description. Other Members have previously claimed to have the most varied constituency, but I want to stake a claim myself.

My constituency starts in inner-city Hyde Park, where we have a vibrant cultural and music scene including the legendary Brudenell Social Club, where only a few weeks ago my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) gave a speech to 5,000 people—people who climbed trees and stood on rooftops to feel part of our movement. We then move on to Headingley, with its world-renowned sporting pedigree. The legendary stadium and cricket ground, home of Yorkshire county cricket club, is to this day the most successful county championship team, and it is also a place where I have spent many happy afternoons since my days as a student.

Weetwood ward, where I make my home, has a fine literary tradition. Once the home of Tolkien—in a towered residence in West Park reminiscent of Minas Tirith—it is now home to many other creative figures, including the award-winning television writer Kay Mellor. Across the ring road, Adel is the setting for the grade I listed church of St John the Baptist, one of the best and most complete Norman churches in the country. My constituency also boasts Yorkshire's international airport in Yeadon, and Otley, with its amazing breadth of events hosting hundreds every year—from the fabulous Otley show to the authentic Victorian fayre. Between

the market towns of Yeadon and Otley lies the beautiful upland Chevin, from which the foundation stones of this very House were hewn, so Leeds North West provides the very foundation of our parliamentary democracy.

My first experience of this place was 20 years ago, when I came here as an executive officer of Leeds University union to lobby Leeds MPs about the retention of student grants and opposing the introduction of tuition fees, an issue I intend to pursue in this Parliament. I met Harold Best, the only other Labour MP to represent Leeds North West, who not only agreed with me on the issues of fees, but spent the afternoon showing me the Palace of Westminster. That reflected his great generosity of spirit, a generosity of spirit which he and his family continue to show me to this day, and one, having a family of my own, that I now wish to replicate in this place.

My immediate predecessor served in this place for 12 years. During that time, he became champion of a number of causes, not the least of which was his support for rugby league and his role as chair of the all-party rugby league group, championing a sport which is of great importance to our local area. Greg Mulholland was also a strong advocate for pubs, not just locally, but across the country, and for local breweries, serving as chair of the all-party save the pub group and as an executive member of the all-party beer group. Greg was a hard-working local MP, fulfilling the intentions made in his own maiden speech to this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), my namesake seat, rightfully claimed to be the first Darren in this place. I can with great certainty say I am the first Sobel to be elected to Parliament. My own parents arrived in this country in 1972, and could not imagine that their son, born at the Leeds Maternity Hospital, would one day enter the mother of Parliaments.

My own history in Leeds North West started, like that of so many of my fellow constituents, as a student in one of the city's fine universities. It was at university that my interest in fighting for justice and equality began, as staff-student representative for the School of Computing at the University of Leeds, first advocating for my fellow students, before going on to campaign on issues such as student funding and against racism on campus. I am still an elected member of Leeds City Council, and prior to my election here, I was the lead for climate change and chair of the affordable warmth partnership—two topics that are close to my heart and to which I will return shortly.

I turn now to the substantive issue of the debate. In doing so, I first want to echo the words of hon. Friends and other hon. Members who have already spoken on this devastating event in expressing my heartfelt condolences and sincere sympathies to the victims of the Grenfell fire, their families and the people of Kensington. I pay tribute to the emergency services who responded so rapidly and bravely, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and all the volunteers who supported families in the aftermath of the fire. That so many lives should have been lost was a tragedy that defies description.

On the Sunday following the fire, I visited the only tower block in my constituency and ensured that tenants felt safe in their homes. Leeds City Council has confirmed to me that no aluminium composite material cladding

has been used on council-owned blocks of flats in Leeds. However, I have been approached by constituents who live or work in other types of clad buildings. I hope the Minister will be taking action to ensure that testing is done on all cladding in this country—working with and compelling the sector representative bodies and building owners to undertake the testing—and that the testing of cladding is fully addressed in the inquiry.

I am sure that all Members of the House agree with me on the need for urgent action on safety, but I would like to address the use of cladding as part of our wider aims to reduce carbon emissions and to reduce fuel bills, tackling fuel poverty. In my constituency, a wholesale programme of external wall insulation started, but then stalled due to cuts in energy company obligation funding, leaving one side of the road with clad buildings and the other side without. External wall insulation—whether using mineral wool, phenolic resin or other materials that meet building regulations and have a U-value of 0.3—contributes to eradicating fuel poverty and to meeting our obligations under the Paris climate change agreement. We must ensure that this work is completed, alongside other measures not just in housing but in transport, energy and manufacturing, to ensure that runaway climate change does not occur. The safety of our citizens is paramount, so we must also ensure that our standards and inspection regimes are among the best in the world.

In the words of President Obama:

“No challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.”

This Chamber is a stage where the world can hear our voice. It is incumbent on me to use that voice to ensure that while I sit on these Benches, I will speak truth to power and be an advocate for this one issue, which will define and shape our future more than any other. Action to combat climate change will give us the best possible chance to save this planet, because it is the only home that we have got. If we do not ensure that we take every step towards a carbon-free future, we will be judged as having failed future generations, and I am sure nobody came into this House to be a failure.

There will be many other local and national issues that I will raise in the House, concerning our market towns, universities, sporting and cultural institutions, transport links and technology, but for today, I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech. I pledge to my constituents and to hon. Members to be a strong voice in this House as well as a powerful advocate for my constituency.

4.40 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and it is delightful to follow the excellent maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). We have also heard three other superb maiden speeches today, from my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock). This House is renewing itself with huge talent, youth, energy and diversity on all sides, and all Members can be proud to see that.

The Grenfell Tower fire was the worst residential fire in modern history and the worst disaster of any kind in this country for 30 years. The truth is that residential

fire is not an equal opportunities killer. I know from the history in my constituency and in Kensington that we in north-west London had a spate of the worst fires in modern history before Grenfell. We had the Clanricarde Gardens fire, in which eight people died and 100 were made homeless. The year before that, in 1980, nine people died in a fire at a hostel for homeless women in Kilburn, and shortly before that, seven people died in a fire in an interconnected multiple-occupied property in Maida Vale.

All those large-scale residential fires had something in common: they affected the lowest-income people in the worst kind of housing. We cannot and should not prejudge the results of the inquiry into exactly how the Grenfell fire started and how it spread so quickly, but the conclusion that we can draw is that it is substandard housing that is at risk, and it is the poorest people who live in substandard housing. They need to be protected. There is an issue of power here, and that needs to be addressed now rather than waiting until the inquiry’s findings are known. There is much that can be legislated for immediately through the issuing of building regulations and guidance, much of which we have heard about today. That includes the lessons that were learned from the Lakandal House fire, but we can also legislate immediately to redress the imbalance of power between landlord and tenant by giving tenants statutory powers of consultation on major works and hearing their voice in a way that, tragically, the voices of Grenfell Tower residents were not heard. We can strengthen the power of redress of tenants in substandard accommodation, both in social and private housing.

Reference has been made to legal aid. It is absolutely right that we should look again at tenants’ capacity to draw on legal aid so that they can represent their case when they are in accommodation that is substandard or in disrepair. Will the Minister commit today to reviewing the whole scope for legislation, both through fire safety regulations and building regulations, and through residents’ rights of redress and consultation? None of that would prejudge the Grenfell Tower inquiry, and progress can be made immediately on all of it.

Homelessness and housing need are also not equal-opportunities impactors; they disproportionately affect the poorest people in this country. In the last week, there have been some increasingly harsh judgments in parts of the media about what has happened to Grenfell residents and how their housing needs are being met. Their housing needs do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in the context of a London that is yet again seeing a rising homelessness crisis, where the number of families accepted as homeless has increased by more than half and where the number of children living in temporary accommodation is on a scale that has not been seen since the early part of the last decade.

I asked the housing Minister a question before and I would like to know whether he can answer it today—how many of the occupants of Grenfell Tower had already been through the homelessness system? We know that there were residents who were already living in temporary accommodation in that building; we know that many of those residents and their families will already have been through the horrific experience of homelessness; and we know that many of their relatives, friends and neighbours will also have been through it.

[*Ms Karen Buck*]

Those people will already know what this House needs to be reminded of, which is that Kensington already has one of the worst homelessness situations in the country, because of the pressure on local housing stock. We know that it has the worst record in the country of moving homeless households away from the borough and that families in temporary accommodation will find that the word “temporary” does not mean what we understand it to mean; instead, it means that people will live for many years, and sometimes for a decade or more, in “temporary” accommodation, often moving from one home to another. Those people will do anything to avoid that experience yet again. Families should not be expected to move more than once and they have an absolute right to know that their housing needs will be met, not only swiftly but fairly and decently.

Also, because this situation does not exist in a vacuum, their housing needs should not be met at the expense of other vulnerable homeless households. It is already the case that in neighbouring boroughs the allocations process has slowed and in some cases stopped—hopefully, only temporarily—while precedence is rightly given at the moment to Grenfell survivors. However, that cannot be allowed to stand over the medium term. We have to know—we must have a categorical assurance from the Minister—that families in other boroughs, and indeed in Kensington, who are also homeless and in housing need will not be pushed to the back of the queue and see their needs go unmet because the council and the Government are not working together to meet the needs of all local families.

We also know that the story of investment in local services is not a fair or equal-opportunities one. We know that urban authorities have been the hardest hit by the Government’s cuts in local authority expenditure since 2010. We also know that, based on present trends, by the end of this decade funding for local Government will have fallen by 70%, which must be seen in the context of the fire safety measures that local authorities want to take to reassure their residents in other high-rise blocks.

It was simply not satisfactory for the Minister to tell us in his opening remarks that only local authorities that demonstrate they cannot afford fire safety work will have the money reimbursed. What message does that send to anxious residents who want to know that their safety will be absolutely paramount? What clarity can he give about what fire brigade fire safety recommendations will meet the criteria for Government funding? Will he confirm that he understands that any expenditure that will be met by local authorities will come from tenants and leaseholders, and that such expenditure will certainly be in competition with the resources needed to fund repairs and maintenance elsewhere in the system? I have already said that expenditure on basic repair and maintenance of social housing is 9.7% lower this year than last year and 22% lower than it was in 2010.

Finally, we hear of the great work being done in the borough by health services, including mental health services. They are working with survivors and other local residents. That work is much needed. Will those services also be fully funded and reimbursed by central Government, so that the mental health services and

other healthcare services for Kensington and for surrounding boroughs will not be put at risk or compromised in any way because those crucial public services have stepped up to the plate now?

My absolutely final point is this. We also heard from the Minister in his opening remarks that there was a fundamental lack of clarity about what the taskforce being sent into Kensington was going to do and what its duties would be—that it will not be an authority with any executive function whatsoever. The Minister needs to be absolutely clear with us what this means. It means that when the Gold operation finishes, the functions of service will be handed back to the already deeply discredited Kensington and Chelsea Council, where trust has totally collapsed. Does the Minister think that is acceptable? I doubt that the people of Kensington will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) has set out so powerfully. I do not believe they have trust in the taskforce; I think they want to see the Government demonstrating that there will be a radically different approach to meeting their needs. We have not heard that yet. The Minister has a chance to put that right later.

4.50 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate, following my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

The tragedy of Grenfell was felt all over the nation. I am sure that I speak for all in my constituency, who send their thoughts and prayers to all those affected, and similarly want a swift and timely response from the investigation into the events of that terrible night. The community surrounding Grenfell wants answers, and if we have learnt anything from past tragedies, it is that the voice of the community must be given paramount attention.

I would like first to pay tribute to the people of Leigh for placing their trust in me to stand here as their first female Member of Parliament. This is all the more important as we fast approach 100 years of unbroken Labour representation for the people of Leigh. I would also like to place on record my thanks to my family for all their support—to my mother, my father and my sisters, but especially to my two children, who are the drivers of my political ambition. As a single mother from a working-class background, wanting what is best for them is wanting what is best for the future of everyone in our country. Without them, I would not be standing here today.

Leigh has always benefited from the strong Labour voices that it elects to this House. With that in mind, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessors Harold Boardman, Lawrence Cunliffe and, of course, my most recent predecessor, Andy Burnham. Andy served this House with commitment for 16 years. His work on the Hillsborough disaster and, more recently, the contaminated blood scandal, as well as his strength and passion for truth and justice, will forever be his legacy. This is something that I can only aspire to emulate.

But it was not just this House that benefited from Andy’s work. Andy was a formidable constituency MP, forging great relationships within our communities and fighting tirelessly for those who did not have a voice. He constantly pushed for the regeneration of the constituency,

driving projects such as the creation of Leigh sports village, the home of the best rugby league team in the country, Leigh Centurions. I am sure that the House will want to wish Andy Burnham every success in his role as Greater Manchester Mayor. I have no doubt that Andy will use his position to ensure that devolution enhances the lives of everyone in Greater Manchester.

Leigh and its people have always had a sense of social justice, from the towns that lie within, such as Tyldesley, Golborne and Atherton, to smaller villages such as Astley, Mosley Common, Lowton and Atherleigh, each with a historic story to tell. From our early focus on agriculture and the uncontroversial creation of the spinning jenny by Thomas Highs—I am giving him that one—Leigh, like most places in the north, gave way to the might of the industrial revolution, in particular the coal and cotton industries, all linked by its canal networks. The legacy of Leigh's industrial past can still be seen in the remaining red-brick mills and the iconic mining headgear at Astley, which is sadly the last one remaining in the whole of Lancashire. Fortunately, however, the good people of Leigh want to keep this legacy alive, and I look forward to the heritage project linking coal at Astley, via the canal, with the great cotton mill of Leigh Spinners.

Like most post-industrial areas, however, we have seen years of decline: our manufacturing industry gone and not replaced; infrastructure, such as our rail link, taken away; and town centres declining. That common story is shared by many constituencies.

Social mobility is a huge problem for young people in Leigh, with many unable to get support to go to college or university. A lack of post-16 education leaves our young people only able to access low-paid, low-skilled jobs. We must ensure that new industries and skills are at the forefront of regeneration in Leigh.

I have spent the last six years as an elected councillor in local government and watched this Government's austerity measures chip away at our essential public services. Cuts to adult social care and children's services are nothing but an attack on the most vulnerable in our society. But I have also seen our local authorities and communities fight back, supporting and empowering the very people they serve. I am proud to have been a part of the innovative way our services have dealt with such measures, helping communities to do what they have always done in times of crisis: supporting each other, just as they did in the 1980s miners' strike and just as they are doing now, in homeless shelters and food banks, as well as with countless volunteers who work to keep our heritage alive. That is what is called a social movement—communities who work tirelessly to ensure each other are supported. Today, I would like to pay tribute to those who give their time to do such work.

My own experience of education in the 1980s was not good. Of course there were many success stories in my school, but many people struggled without adequate support, and were not equipped to face the challenges of a changing economic landscape. Many left school without qualifications, ambitions and hope. Today our children and young people face the same challenges, from cuts to early years to cuts to early-intervention grants and, of course, cuts to our schools—the very resource that gives our children and young people the support that they need to do well. We cannot afford to

see our children suffer because of ignorance of the challenges faced by our more deprived communities, and I will do all that I can to ensure that all aspects of our children's lives are adequately supported.

I am proud to stand among Labour colleagues, men and women, and in particular the new intake, all sporting their individual regional accents—how refreshing! I am proud of my working-class roots and of those who built the very area I now represent. When we talk about standing on the shoulders of giants, these are the giants I wish to attribute myself to. Let us not forget that there are giants now who are also making history. I stand side by side with them: our WASPI women; our miners still fighting for their lost pensions; our veterans, who are still not receiving the support they are owed once they leave service; our disabled and sick, who are being unfairly treated by our systems; and our public services—the police, the fire service, the NHS and schools. These are the backbone of our communities, and we as representatives must continue to stand up for them.

There is no good reason for people in Leigh, or anywhere, to endure the insecurities they now face. It is a choice—a choice to defend our communities and public services that I have been sent here to fight for, on behalf of the people of Leigh.

4.58 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am not sure if this has been planned or not but, as the regional Whip for my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), it is nice to have this opportunity to congratulate her on a wonderful speech. She obviously has big shoes to fill, but it is clear that she will be more than able to fill them. I know that she will be a real credit to this House and the people of Leigh.

First, I want to add my thanks to the emergency services for their bravery in the Grenfell Tower fire. I also offer my sincere and heartfelt condolences to those who lost their lives, their families and their homes.

I want to focus on an issue that I firmly believe has not received enough attention in the aftermath of last month's fire. Since then, the media, we in this House and the wider public have sought answers for what caused the disaster. So far, cladding, individuals and the local authority have taken much of the blame, but I rise in today's debate to highlight the role that insulation could have played in the hope that the House and the inquiry will consider the consequences of using flammable insulation, rather than a non-flammable alternative.

For those who are not aware, Grenfell Tower was insulated with a foam product named Celotex RS5000, also known as PIR. The first issue is that PIR is flammable. In small-scale tests the material's combustibility appears to be limited, but under genuine fire conditions it is nothing short of combustible. The second issue is that when it is ignited, PIR releases toxic, deadly fumes, the most notorious of which is hydrogen cyanide, the effects of which a number of Grenfell survivors were treated for.

In the vast insulation market, there are many alternatives to PIR. The key point is that insulation has been developed that is simply not combustible. For example, the use of insulation engineered from stone wool could have saved lives in Grenfell, as it has done in previous fires. The key problems with foam insulation such as PIR are completely avoided with stone wool. It is not

[Chris Elmore]

combustible, so it does not encourage or spread fire. As a result, it does not create the problem of toxic product inhalation.

Constructors are well aware of the dangers of using foam or fibreglass, but cannot or will not find the funds to use non-combustible stone wool. I am not suggesting for a moment that private developers should be legally bound to develop private housing estates or other developments using a particular type of insulation. Those are commercial decisions for businesses and developers, but I hope that those businesses would put public safety at the heart of whatever they are constructing in the private sector. Social housing, however, is there to protect our most vulnerable, and it should be the responsibility of the Government to legislate to ensure that the insulation used in our social housing is non-combustible.

This week I have put written questions to the Department for Communities and Local Government to ask what it will do to test similar insulation for combustibility. The reply from Ministers, in short, is that they are doing nothing. They are offering no testing, and they have no plans to do so. Today I have written to Sir Martin Moore-Bick asking him to confirm the extent to which his inquiry will consider the role of insulation in the fire, given that the Government have thus far treated the matter as an afterthought.

5.3 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is almost a month since the horrific tragedy at Grenfell Tower in Kensington. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my sympathies to the individuals and families for the horrendous ordeal that they endured, and for the loss and uncertainty they have encountered since. As colleagues have said, this has had an impact far beyond Kensington and far beyond London. In my constituency of Redditch, there have been outpourings of sympathy and offers of practical help, as residents have rallied round and organised donations of much-needed items for the victims.

I welcome the actions that the Government and the local authority have taken so far, including the emergency funding that has been made available and the rehousing of surviving residents. I call on the Minister to confirm that everything is indeed being done to help those poor families who have suffered and lost so much, and that he is taking into account the needs of each family to ensure that they have a home that is right for them, so that they can rebuild their lives. I also welcome the deployment of experienced civil servants. We recognise that they are dealing with a complex situation as they support the council in its response.

I welcome the additional £1.5 million to assist in delivering mental health support to victims. We can only imagine how devastating it must be for them to endure that mental trauma and that post-traumatic stress syndrome as they seek to rebuild their lives. I also welcome the funding to ensure that residents are represented during the inquiry. Does the Minister agree that it is in the interests of Grenfell residents, their friends and families and those who died that we allow Sir Martin to start the inquiry and get on with the job of establishing the facts of the case, instead of speculating further? It is

right that an inquiry is launched, so that we may learn from this terrible incident, better understand the events that led to the disaster, and prevent a similar tragedy. Redditch Borough Council is doing that, and I congratulate it on reviewing and launching an emergency disaster response. Even though we do not have tower blocks, we recognise the impact on other public buildings, including schools and hospitals.

As the Secretary of State recognised, the national and local response was not good enough in the aftermath of the fire, and processes must be rectified to support victims better in future. What steps is the Department taking to review our emergency planning procedures to ensure that future responses are rapid, effective and give proper support to victims? I am pleased to see that precautions are being taken and checks are being made, and that the Department for Communities and Local Government, alongside the Government Property Unit, is overseeing building regulations and wider checks on public sector buildings.

I was deeply shocked and concerned by the incident at Grenfell Tower, and that led me to seek assurances from Redditch Borough Council regarding the condition and safety of council-owned housing. I know that colleagues on both sides of the House are doing the same in their constituencies. I was pleased to learn that all properties within the borough contain cladding and insulation that is certified and installed to stringent nationally recognised standards. However, I finish by calling on the Secretary of State to consider reviewing building regulations and fire safety procedures in the light of the results of the Grenfell Tower inquiry; that will help us to ensure that regulations are up to date and take into account all the learnings from this tragedy. Every effort should be made around the country to give people who live in tower blocks, or who spend their education or leisure time in public buildings such as leisure centres, community centres, hospitals and schools, confidence that they are safe.

5.7 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am glad to be able to contribute to this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friends who have made maiden speeches this afternoon. It has been a real pleasure to hear them, particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), who is my neighbour in Greater Manchester.

Like other Members, I repeat my deep condolences to every victim of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, which is an unimaginable horror for those affected. When we first learned of it just after the general election, it seemed that everyone around the House, especially Ministers, were absolutely horrified by the scale of what had occurred. There was a real sense of determination right across the House and Government to act to ensure that nothing like this could happen ever again in our country. I do not question Ministers' continuing deep sense of responsibility and desire to make things different, but the reality is that we seem to have already lost that sense of impetus. We seem to be down in the mire of uncertainty about who is responsible, what is to be done, and when we are going to have clarity about what will keep people safe in their homes. That is playing out every day among tenants, leaseholders and homeowners in my constituency.

Of the high-rise blocks in Stretford and Urmston, eight are owned by social landlords, seven by Trafford Housing Trust, and one by Irwell Valley. The remainder are owned by a range of private companies, the names of which are meaningless to me; I have no idea who these companies are, who owns them, or who governs them. There is a major housing development in my constituency, with more in train; new privately owned high-rise blocks are being constructed. I do not believe that there is no place in our housing mix for good-quality high-rise housing, but if those new buildings are not constructed to the very highest standards, as we should expect in the light of Grenfell, and if we are not yet sure what those highest standards look like, those developments need to be paused until we can be confident about it.

The other day, when I asked one of my social landlords how things felt now, he said, “Well, it’s continuing to get worse,” by which he meant that there is increasing uncertainty, because the actions that need to be taken are becoming increasingly unclear. I recognise that there is an inordinately complex mix of factors to be considered, but that is of no use to landlords and tenants who are trying to make decisions about how to act in response to safety concerns. I urge Ministers to do everything they can to give clarity and certainty, at the highest common denominator, as soon as possible.

A small number of blocks in Trafford are partially clad, and all that cladding, as across the country, has failed the flammability tests. The intention is to remove the cladding, but the work has not yet begun because the property owners cannot be sure that, in removing the cladding, they will not make the buildings even less safe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) rightly alluded to concerns about insulation. Our landlords intend to have that insulation tested, but can Ministers say why the testing of insulation is not being mandated and put on the same footing, with the same resources, as the testing of cladding? I find that inexplicable. Are Ministers aware of how many buildings have had their insulation tested? What has been the result of that testing?

There is a clear view on both sides of the House that sprinklers should now be retrofitted. Do Ministers have a view on whether, in some cases, it may be appropriate to install sprinkler systems on the outside of buildings, as well as the inside? As to whether sprinklers are installed in homes or only in common areas, that will vary from building to building, but an indication of Ministers’ attitudes to those questions would be helpful.

Similarly, do Ministers have a view on whether planning legislation could accommodate the possibility that additional external fire escapes may now be needed on some buildings? Will advice be given on alarm systems and on the level of safety checks that landlords should carry out? Will there be new advice on whether people should stay put in their flat or flee in the event of a reported fire? What assessment has been made of whether any remedial activity may expose new dangers, such as those relating to asbestos? Have Ministers reminded those who own high-rise buildings of their particular obligation to work safely with asbestos?

I am not clear, and landlords in my constituency are not clear, about the precise responsibilities of the fire service and landlords. Is the fire service giving advice

that landlords have to weigh up and interpret when deciding how to act, or is the advice mandatory? I hope that the Minister can give us clarity.

The assurances we have received from Ministers on who will meet the costs have been opaque. Saying that Ministers and the Government will work with landlords and councils that are not able to meet the costs tells us nothing. We cannot have tenants bearing the costs, and we cannot expect leaseholders to bear the costs, because they cannot afford them. Social landlords and councils will run out of money as they put the different rectification measures in place. Ministers need to say clearly that, at a minimum, they will underwrite the costs, and that rather than the Government working with landlords to fund the measures, the costs will be met by central Government.

I want to mention a few other risks that have been identified and the questions that landlords in particular are asking me. Cladding is beginning to be removed from properties across Greater Manchester and the rest of the country. That is happening during the summer months, when the warmth provided by the cladding, and its protective effects on the decency standards of those homes, is perhaps not a major issue. Come winter, however, if that cladding has not been replaced by new means of keeping those homes warm and dry, there will likely be a rise in cold and damp homes, respiratory illness and all the other associated problems that we always hear about in our constituency surgeries. It will also result in extra costs for householders, who will spend this winter turning up their heating. Many of them are on relatively low incomes. It would be helpful if Ministers could indicate that, where it has not been possible to make those homes warm and dry again in time for winter, there will be help for tenants in meeting heating bills. They need that assurance; otherwise the poorest and elderly tenants will simply turn off their heating, at great risk to their health and wellbeing.

That brings me to my final point: the position of vulnerable tenants in these buildings, particularly those in sheltered accommodation. In some parts of Greater Manchester—thankfully not in my constituency—there are high-rise blocks that provide sheltered housing. Moreover, even low-rise sheltered housing is, as one of my social landlords put it to me, basically a tower block turned on its side. There are many vulnerable tenants in large sheltered housing accommodation. We need the Government to work with landlords on strategies to protect vulnerable tenants in particular, whether or not they are in dedicated sheltered accommodation.

Will Ministers give particular consideration to the contentious issue of data sharing? In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire, as my social landlords began to try to take action to make premises safe and offer assurances to tenants, I was told that they did not necessarily know who was in every flat, or the particular vulnerabilities that those tenants might have. So far as is possible, information is being shared across social services, schools, NHS commissioners and others, but obviously there are real difficulties and sensitivities. The Government envisage introducing a data protection Bill this Parliament, so that is an opportunity to think carefully and constructively about achieving a balance that respects individual privacy and data, but allows for appropriate access when that is important for health,

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safety and the preservation of life. I hope that that will be fed into the proposed legislation as Ministers develop it.

There is potential for some good to come from this appalling atrocity, but only if Ministers retain the determination and resolve that we saw in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. I tell them, for the sake of those who have died, those who have lost family members and those who live in tower blocks today and will do so in future: you must take on that responsibility.

5.18 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate hon. Members who have made such powerful maiden speeches today, including in particular my constituency neighbours, my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), with whom I look forward to working on the issues that affect all of our constituents in south London.

The Grenfell Tower fire was an unspeakable horror that became an unimaginable tragedy for hundreds of people who lost parents, sisters, brothers, children, friends and the fabric of their lives, the basis of their security and community. My thoughts are with everyone affected by such devastating loss. Indeed, it has often been hard to think about anything else over the past month.

The fire has had a profound impact not only on all those who were directly affected by it, but on the wider community in Kensington and London, and on the country as a whole. The first priority must of course be help and support for survivors of the fire to access new homes within their existing community that meet their needs and are genuinely affordable, and the support they need to rebuild their lives.

The Government must also recognise that for residents throughout the country one consequence of the Grenfell Tower fire has been a colossal loss of confidence and trust, because somewhere along the line the systems, regulations, standards, inspections and emergency procedures that were put in place to keep people safe failed to do so. Since the Grenfell Tower fire, there have been two fires in tower blocks in my constituency; on one of those occasions, I was on site as the fire broke out. The level of anxiety and fear that residents in tower blocks feel at the moment cannot be overstated. In working to ensure that such a tragedy can never happen again, the Government must focus on how confidence and trust can be rebuilt so that residents of tower blocks throughout the country can rest easy again, without any shadow of a doubt that the framework of governance, regulation and inspection that is supposed to keep them safe will do so.

I was elected as a councillor in the London Borough of Southwark in 2010, the year after the Lakanal House fire, as part of a new council administration picking up the pieces following that devastating tragedy in which six people lost their lives. Fire safety was the council's top priority. Every block was subject to a rigorous fire-risk assessment, starting with the tallest blocks and working down, and the council spent more than £60 million on fire safety works. Fire safety is an ongoing responsibility and must be monitored and assessed constantly, so I am not suggesting there is any room for complacency in

Southwark or that there is not more to do, but the level of commitment to ensuring that Lakanal could not happen again was crystal clear.

Lakanal House should have been the wake-up call not just for a single borough, but for the country as a whole. The fact that it was not is down to the lack of political will and commitment from a Government who are ideologically committed to deregulation at all costs and the reduction of public expenditure, and down to seven years of deep cuts to local and central Government and to our emergency services.

The obsession with deregulation was illustrated in 2014 when the then Housing Minister said, following advice from the Lakanal House coroner that the Government should consider progressing the installation of sprinkler systems in all tower blocks:

“We believe that it is the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government, to market fire sprinkler systems effectively and to encourage their wider installation.”—[Official Report, 6 February 2014; Vol. 575, c. 188WH.]

What utter nonsense. It is the responsibility of the Government to keep people safe, and that requires a framework of regulation and funding, not a private marketing campaign for sprinklers. That same ideologically driven approach to deregulation has resulted in the review of building regulations that the Lakanal House coroner also called for being left in the long grass for four years.

Multiple problems with the regulatory framework need to be addressed. Fire risk assessments can be undertaken by anyone—there is no requirement for any minimum level of qualifications, expertise or registration, and no requirement for independence. There is no minimum requirement for the number of building control inspections that have to be undertaken during construction works, allowing defects to be built in and covered up between inspections. The all-party group for excellence in the built environment, of which I am vice-chair, published a report a year ago that highlighted this issue. It said:

“We are concerned that competition in building control might be fuelling a race to the bottom and we are therefore recommending there should be a defined minimum number of inspections”.

There has been no Government action on the issue.

Building control inspections can be self-procured from private providers, thereby setting up a contractual relationship between construction contractors and building control inspectors that lacks independence and can therefore be compromised. The Government cannot pretend that austerity is not part of the problem. There has been a huge loss of local authority capacity because of cuts to council budgets. Planning and building control is the second most severely cut area of expenditure across local authority services. There has also been a huge loss of capacity in the Department for Communities and Local Government and among the emergency services.

Even without the conclusions of a public inquiry, it is clear that there are actions that the Government can and must take now to rebuild the trust of residents living in tower blocks. They must act on advice that has already been received and information that is already known. There must be a complete overhaul of the fire safety inspection regime: responsibility must be restored to the fire service on a completely independent and statutory footing and cuts to the fire service must be reversed to enable it to fulfil that role. There must be a

complete overhaul of building regulations, as called for by the Lakanal House coroner four years ago, and its recommendations must apply to existing buildings as well as new builds. Residents must be given a voice in this process. The Government must provide urgent clarity on the safety of cladding products of all types, not just aluminium composite cladding and insulation, including advice on safe replacements for panels that need to be removed and specifications for new buildings. Importantly, there must be new rights for residents in high-rise blocks who have concerns about fire safety to trigger an independent inspection, the outcome of which has statutory weight.

Finally, the Government must stop playing semantic games on the funding for fire safety works arising as a consequence of the Grenfell Tower fire. In response to a written question I submitted last week on this matter, the relevant Minister wrote:

“Where work is necessary to ensure the fire safety of social housing, we will ensure that lack of financial resources will not prevent it going ahead.”

What does that mean? Does it mean that the Government will decide whether they believe that councils have the resources or not? What will be the process? Who will make the decision? The Grenfell Tower fire came out of the blue, and the steps to put it right cannot be at the expense of planned maintenance or major works, or of the delivery of urgently needed new homes. The Government must make a firm commitment to fund fire safety works, sprinkler systems and the replacement of cladding required in response to Grenfell Tower, and they must make this commitment as a matter of urgency. So I call on them to begin the process of addressing the fears that communities across the country have because of Grenfell Tower, and of restoring trust and confidence in the systems that are there to protect people. The memory of those who lost their lives must be respected and honoured by making absolutely certain that such a tragedy can never happen again.

5.26 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and her typically thoughtful contribution in this important debate. I am also pleased to have had the chance to listen to maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves). I was trying to think what the collective noun must be for maiden speeches and I decided on this occasion that it is a feast—we had a feast of maiden speeches. Their constituents must be proud of them already, and I know that they will work very hard in the months and years ahead to repay the confidence that their constituents showed in them.

The First Secretary, in opening the debate, referred to the fire guidance and Approved Document B, which is an essential element of the building regulations. He said that the expert panel will be advising the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and it is that issue that I wish to ask about. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), speaking for Her Majesty’s Opposition, also commented on that aspect of matters relevant to Grenfell, saying that the Government can start the overhaul of building

regulations now and feed into the public inquiry recommendations afterwards. In my view, that is the right approach to take.

I raised the issue of the terms of reference for the public inquiry in my Adjournment debate two weeks ago, when I said:

“It would be very helpful if the Minister gave the House any details of when more might be known about the inquiry, which will face many questions on many issues. They include: the source of the fire; the rapidity of the spread of the fire; the catastrophic failure of all the fire protection features that the building should have contained; the building’s refurbishment, including the original specifications and the materials actually used, as well as the quality of the work and the finish; the monitoring of building control; the inspection of the completed job by the council, the designated responsible person and the fire service”.—[Official Report, 30 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 430.]

I went on to raise the question of the outstanding review of the building regulations guidance on fire, as contained in Approved Document B, and the recommendation for urgent review by the Lakanal House coroner in 2013. There is no statutory timetable laid down for a periodic review of the guidance, as I said at the time and as I mentioned in my earlier question to the First Secretary when he was opening this debate. In my Adjournment debate, I asked about the building regulations, and in response the Minister said that after Lakanal House:

“The Government took action in a number of areas following that fire. In particular, DCLG provided funding to enable the Local Government Association, in partnership with the housing sector and enforcement authorities, to publish new fire safety guidance for purpose-built flat blocks in 2011. That guidance is still current”.—[Official Report, 26 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 436.]

That raises the key issue. If the guidance is still current and it failed at Grenfell, one of two things must be true: either the guidance is not up to the job and needs reviewing, or the guidance is adequate but was ignored. That is the fundamental question that should be addressed by the independent expert advisory panel, which was announced by the Secretary of State and which contains a number of distinguished members. As I understand it, it can also second additional members for specific tasks. When he responds, will the Minister tell us whether the panel has identified the guidance in Approved Document B of the fire regulations as a priority piece of work that needs addressing? As has been mentioned several times today, it was last revised in 2006, so its review is overdue.

If the Government await the outcome of the public inquiry and then start the review—given that it will then take time for any working party to do its job properly—the gap between the last revision and an updated Approved Document B will be at least 14 years and probably a lot longer. Historically, the reviews in the UK are usually about 10 years apart—in some other countries it is less. Does the Minister agree that that is too long a gap and that there should be a statutory responsibility to review the guidelines in a set period of time rather than having a periodic review? Has the expert panel commented on that? If it has not, will the Minister ask them that question?

On 3 July, in response to the above questions, the Secretary of State said to me:

“The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about building regulations and the guidance on them. It is already clear to us that there will need to changes, and that we need to look carefully at

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

the causes and at the fact that so many buildings are failing the guidance test. The expert panel has a wide remit, which is broadly to recommend to the Government immediately any action it thinks we should take that will improve public safety.”—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 920.]

That validates my question about whether the expert panel has recommended an immediate urgent review. If the answer is no, will the Minister ask it why it has arrived at that conclusion?

It is not just me who is asking these questions. The all-party fire safety and rescue group has been pressing them for some time. The Royal Institute of British Architects wrote to colleagues yesterday, saying:

“Ahead of any inquiry conclusions, the RIBA has called on the Government to carry out the following:

Commence immediately the delayed formal review of Approved Document B, which was first proposed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in 2013 in response to the Coroner’s rule 43 letter following the inquest into the deaths resulting from the 2009 fire at Lakanal House.

The RIBA believes that the review of Approved Document B must be a comprehensive, transparent and fundamental reappraisal, rather than an amendment or clarification, and should begin without delay to remove uncertainty, provide clarity and protect public safety.”

It also goes on to raise the issues of Building Bulletin 100 and school sprinkler systems, which I also highlighted in my debate and which has been mentioned by several colleagues today.

The Fire Sector Federation president, former London Fire Commissioner Mr Brian Robinson, writes a more qualified view of Approved Document B, which none the less supports the idea of a review. He said:

“We would also part recommend and suggest increased provisions for protection, including sprinklers, in line with the latest thinking in fire safety. But an update of AD B is only one part of the greater whole. That isn’t, by any means, the complete solution to the weaknesses exposed by the Grenfell fire.”

In support of that key point, the Association of British Insurers was even more direct. It said:

“A comprehensive review is urgently needed of ‘Approved Document B’, the regulations in England covering fire safety matters within and around buildings. The ABI has been calling for a comprehensive review of Approved Document B since 2009, and most recently in May 2017 in our response to the Government’s Housing White Paper.”

My final source is the London Fire Brigade itself. In the briefing for this debate supplied by Helen Newton on behalf of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, it says of Approved Document B:

“This document has not been reviewed for some time, which means that it has not kept up with British standards and new and innovative methods of construction or allowed debate of the sprinklers and other suppression systems especially around specialised housing.”

We have been calling for Approved Document B to be reviewed and renew that call now as a matter of urgency.”

The Lakanal coroner, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Association of British Insurers, the Fire Sector Federation, fire authorities, the all-party group and others, including the Fire Protection Association, which I have not had time to quote, all agree on the urgency of reviewing Approved Document B. It is not the full solution, but it needs to be done, and it needs to be done now—not in three or five years’ time. If the

work does not start until after the public inquiry, it could be as long as five years before Approved Document B is renewed. The “Government building safety programme—explanatory note” says:

“We have set up an expert panel to advise us on other urgent steps we should take to improve fire safety.”

I would be grateful if the Minister addressed my specific points about the review of Approved Document B. For the avoidance of doubt, I should say that there are three questions. Has the expert panel advised on an immediate review of Approved Document B? If not, will the Secretary of State ask the panel whether it considers such an immediate review to be appropriate? Will the Secretary of State deposit the answer to those two questions in the Library?

It has been said many times today that the majority of those who die in fires are the poor, the old, the young and the sick, as well as people with substance abuse issues and the rest of it. The Grenfell Tower fire demonstrated that—writ large. We need regulations to protect people in our buildings. Approved Document B is the foundation stone on which all buildings safety is constructed. If it is not operating as it should, we are exposing people to more danger.

5.36 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). I do not pretend to match his expertise, but I hope that the Minister has listened to his absolutely vital points about the key element of safety and the passion with which he made them.

My constituency neighbours Kensington; many of my constituents have strong community and family ties with the victims of Grenfell Tower. We are now host to between 50 and 100 of those victims in hotel accommodation in the borough. Just yesterday, I found out that Kensington Aldridge Academy, at the foot of Grenfell Tower, will now be housed for about a year in portakabins built on Wormwood Scrubs. I use that as an example of the ramifications of this terrible national disaster, which will affect many people—not just in Kensington and the rest of London, but across the country. They will last a long time.

I wish to put a number of questions to the Minister. The first is, who is in charge? We have heard statements from at least five Ministers; four were present at the beginning of this debate, but only for the opening speeches. Although I value the contribution of the Prime Minister and others and the ordering of a full public inquiry at an early stage, I am afraid to say that, since that happened, there has been confusion and a degree of inaction. I do not say that with any pleasure.

Who is the Minister at central Government level who takes overall responsibility? Should there be a specifically designated Minister to deal with this tragedy? After all, Ministers are often appointed to deal with natural disasters; this is a man-made disaster with just as many—if not more—ramifications, and over more time. If the position is confusing at national level, it is even more confusing in Kensington and Chelsea. I am afraid that what has happened in that benighted borough since these terrible events has been appalling—almost tragicomic.

First, there was the chief executive, clearly not up to the job, who was thrown under a bus to protect his political masters—he went reluctantly. Then there was a leader who should have gone as soon as it was clear that the disaster relief was a disaster in itself, but who said that he was leaving because of “purported” failures. A new leader has now been installed. From what I have seen of her, I do not think she is up to the job either. I found it highly embarrassing to hear her on the radio this morning saying that she had not been into high-rise council blocks before. She has been a cabinet member for at least five years and a councillor for the borough for at least 11. I have visited all sorts of accommodation around the borough hundreds if not thousands of times, for all sorts of reasons. In all honesty, how can someone who works for an inner London borough not have been into the flats? She later clarified by saying, “I might have been canvassing there, but I’ve never been into a flat there.” I do not want to personalised the matter, but it is clear that she is simply out of touch with the people she is trying to represent, and honestly cannot represent the people of north Kensington in particular. That is why a ready solution was available in the form of commissioners.

None of us, particularly those of us with a local government background, want to see commissioners go in, but they had been put in previously during less extreme cases. There is a suspicion that politics is preventing that from happening. An obvious course of action is to put commissioners in to manage the situation. We have London elections next May, so what is the problem? Instead, there is a hybrid solution with a taskforce, which, as the Secretary of State clarified earlier, is advisory, but which does not report to the people in charge, who are still the same old bosses in Kensington and Chelsea. How is that a recipe in any way for clarity, firm judgment and decision making in Kensington and Chelsea?

Who is on the taskforce? It was announced by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government a week ago, but we do not know who these people are or their terms of reference. We do not know whether any of them have been appointed or whether they have visited the borough over this period of time. I am afraid that this all smacks of the continuing delay and prevarication that has become the hallmark of dealing with the aftermath of Grenfell. Is the Minister able to clarify those points? If he is the Minister who is going to take responsibility, I am sure that we will all support him, but let us have that clarity.

It is true that it took about a week—too late—to realise what a disaster the Kensington management team were and to put in the new Gold team under John Barradell. Things did start to improve because there were more competent people in place, but they only started to improve and we are still not entirely there. I remember that my chief executive in Hammersmith was on the phone at 6 o’clock in the morning offering help, and that was true of many other London boroughs. Accommodation, offices and assistance were offered, but calls simply were not returned. It was not that the offers were rejected or accepted; there was simply no co-ordination of services. Even when the new Gold team came in, what appeared to be a better solution to the situation was not quite all it seemed.

Let me give an example that I mentioned in an intervention. I went to speak to a group of Grenfell survivors who are now in a hotel in Fulham, and they

told me differing stories. That is not surprising because every single family has a different story and different needs. Some had not been made housing offers and some had. Some had initially been told that they would not get a housing offer at all because they were lodgers and not tenants. That was then revised. Some were given keyworkers, albeit somewhat belatedly. Some only had keyworkers in the sense that people would occasionally ring them from hidden numbers, so they could not get back in touch and that person would not answer many of their questions. Others said they had a good relationship with the keyworkers. Some had been given money and some had not. Some had been given money on one day, but then another family member was refused money the next day.

It seemed an entirely arbitrary system, which was extraordinarily confusing to people who, let us not forget, were already living without any of their possessions, having suffered, at best, the severe trauma of the evacuation, and who were often in a state of bereavement after losing family members, neighbours and friends in the fire. They have now been stuck in hotels for four weeks or more. I am proud of the staff and management of the hotel I visited. They made people welcome and looked after them, but the truth is that people cannot live in a small room in a budget hotel. Many of these people had no change of clothes and no money when they were first sent to hotels. Whole families were put in one room, and Kensington and Chelsea Council had no further contact with them. In several cases, they were picked up by local residents in Hammersmith, who got them food, put them in touch with people and got local businesses to give them food, cleaning facilities and clothes for free. Hammersmith Council then intervened and gave them money, vouchers and things of that kind. But this was all on an ad hoc basis. How on earth can this be happening in our capital city in the 21st century? Yes, things are getting better, but they are getting better only slowly.

Let me put to bed the myth of the offers of accommodation. These offers of accommodation included people being asked to go to places substantial travelling distances from their children’s school or their place of work. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), offers of accommodation were made to disabled people when there was no disabled access. One elderly lady I spoke to could not get into the toilet at the place she was offered. Is it reasonable to refuse an offer of accommodation like that? I think it probably is.

But it goes further than that. I ask the Minister to imagine that his house burned down, even without all the trauma associated with Grenfell Tower. I think he would expect the insurance company to put him up in like-for-like accommodation in a similar area, ensure that he could continue his life as best as he could, and then restore the property and move him back in or give him an equivalent alternative property. I do not see why the residents of Grenfell Tower should get any less, even if the assistance has to come from the state, rather than an insurance company.

So let us not pretend that we are doing people favours and offering them permanent accommodation or like-for-like accommodation. Some of the accommodation around Grenfell is excellent quality social housing, and we should be proud of the fact that it was built in the

[*Andy Slaughter*]

1960s and 1970s. It has good space standards, and it is light and airy, with plenty of room. Why should these people be given anything less than that as an alternative when they have suffered so much already?

That brings me to the wider issue of housing. There was an interesting piece on the “Today” programme last week looking at the options for the long-term rehousing of the people from Grenfell Tower. It went through half a dozen, and they are quite revealing. First, people could be put at the top of the housing waiting list in Kensington. The problem with that, apparently, is that only about eight units come up per week, and most of those are small, one-bedroom flats. Nobody mentioned the fact that taking that option would displace everybody who had been on the housing waiting list for years and years. However, that option was ruled out because of the small number of units.

What about the private rented sector? The Residential Landlords Association said, quite rightly, that private rented accommodation is a completely different form of tenure: there is no real security, and mortgage lenders often attach conditions that mean that tenants on benefits or tenants who want longer tenancies are not eligible to take that accommodation, so that option goes out as well.

What about redeveloping? What about estate regeneration, which councils such as Kensington often use to reduce the quantum of social housing? It was said that most estates in inner London are already at high density, and only a limited number of additional units can be put into them.

One novel suggestion was to use the big development sites at White City and Old Oak in my constituency to temporarily house people. That is an interesting development. I would absolutely welcome new social housing being built on the big development sites in my constituency, and I am sure that, as part of that, we would absolutely welcome people displaced from Grenfell, as well as our own residents. But that is not what was being offered; what was being suggested was temporary accommodation on a building site for three to five years until people could be moved on and luxury housing could be built, as originally planned.

The 68 units in Kensington Row have been mentioned a number of times. Initially, there was a rather inflammatory article in *The Guardian*, in which the other residents of this large luxury development on Kensington High Street said they did not want people like the Grenfell tenants living cheek by jowl with them. Whatever misinformation led to that story, the Kensington Row flats on offer are not luxury flats—they are not the £1 million one-bedroom flats that characterise the rest of that development. They are existing affordable housing units which would have been used for people who cannot afford market rents. In most cases, Grenfell Tower tenants will be offered existing social housing. That means that social housing tenants generally—people in existing council and housing association accommodation, and people on the waiting list, which, in west London, is a very long waiting list—will be subsidising the relief effort for Grenfell Tower.

The sixth option was this: why not buy some units of accommodation? That was ruled out, because a unit of accommodation—a two-bedroom flat in Kensington—costs

about £600,000. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington, Kensington and Chelsea has a balance of nearly £300 million which it has been stashing away. Moreover, if anyone thinks it is controversial to change units between the social and market housing sectors, let me point out that when the Conservatives were running Hammersmith Council it was selling off its social housing on the open market as it became empty, for nearly half a million pounds per unit. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: if you can sell it off, you can buy it.

I want the Minister to give a clear instruction to Kensington Council. I suggest that he should go away and listen to the interview with its leader, which was, I may say, a superb example of interviewing skill. At the fourth or fifth time of asking, having tried to dodge the question on every possible occasion, she said yes, the council would buy some units. I hope the Minister will listen to that interview, and I hope he will hold the council leader to her promise so that we can start to provide permanent, decent, adequate housing for the people who suffered in Grenfell Tower, and do so sooner rather than later.

This also shines a light on the wider crisis in social housing. If we cannot find social housing units for the 200 to 300 families who have been displaced from Grenfell Tower and the blocks around it, how can we come near to resolving the overall housing crisis, especially in high-value areas? The other story that has been doing the rounds in inner London concerns what is happening at Battersea power station, where there is a development consisting of 4,200 properties. The developer has persuaded Wandsworth Council to reduce the number of affordable homes by 40%, from 686 to 386, and they now represent 9% of the development. That is the truth of Conservative policy on affordable housing in London. The Minister has an opportunity to say, when he winds up the debate, that that will no longer happen, in the case of Grenfell Tower and in the wider context as well.

Let me raise one final issue. I will not speak about it for long, because others with more expertise, including my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, have already spoken about it. The issue of safety, in the widest sense, must be resolved, and it cannot be resolved over the timescale of the public inquiry. Earlier action must be taken.

Both the chair and the secretary of the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group—the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse—mentioned the group’s expert adviser and secretary, former chief fire officer Ronnie King. Has made a number of very clear points which he wishes us to put to the Minister, and we are happy to do so. The first relates to Approved Document B—it has been dealt with extensively—and the fact that it needs to be revised, and that we need clarity in relation to the whole issue of construction and external cladding.

We are not talking only about the type of cladding that has been tested; we are talking about all forms of cladding. We are talking—as other Members have said—about insulation, and about how it is fitted. In particular, we are asking, “What is the effect of fire?” We are not talking about what can be done on a desktop computer or on a small piece of cladding, but about what happens when a real building burns when it has cladding of that kind, or some similar external modification. The London

Building Acts—which, I believe, were repealed in 1986 and replaced by a much weaker form of legislation—specified an hour's retardation of fire on external structures. Why can we not go back to those standards and have that clarity? A huge amount of testing needs to be done; this is not just about testing the minority of types of cladding that the Minister has spoken about so far.

Cladding is only one issue, because there is also the issue of sprinklers. I wish the Minister and his colleagues would stop saying that they have done exactly what the Lakanal House coroner said. The coroner recommended that this matter should be looked at, and all the Government did was to pass it on to local authorities.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government should seek to introduce the legislation on the installation of sprinklers that we already have in Labour-run Wales?

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely agree that we can learn from the devolved Administrations on this issue. It is weasel words for the Minister to say that the coroner did not insist that we follow that recommendation. A coroner cannot insist on such matters. The coroner gave a clear indication, and the Government dodged the issue. I think that it should be revisited.

Another issue that should be revisited is who carries out inspections of tower blocks. That is not just about cladding, but about fire alarms, means of escape, maintenance and access for emergency vehicles. In the course of the public inquiry, we may find out that all of those were factors at Grenfell Tower. We must not wait for the inquiry, because my constituents who live in tower blocks will not be able to sleep easily in their beds at night until they know that they are living, as they always thought they were, in entirely safe buildings and until they know what they are supposed to do in the case of a fire. The Minister therefore has quite a long agenda to tackle.

Let me make one final point. It is a matter for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy rather than for the Minister's Department, but I know he is taking an interest in it. The cause of the fire was once again a white good manufactured by one of the Whirlpool companies. There was an electrical fire in a fridge-freezer, just as one of the known fire risk white goods—an Indesit tumble dryer—caught fire causing a substantial tower block fire in my constituency last year. When are the Government going to start tackling these issues?

The issues involve the registration of white goods, the collection of data on which are safe and which are unsafe, the recall of products when they are shown to be dangerous and the release of the risk assessments that currently—and scandalously—are not revealed on grounds of commercial confidentiality for the companies that manufacture the goods. It is another whole area of investigation that is long overdue. Although much of the attention on Grenfell concentrates on the external spread of the fire, the fire would never have got outside the tower block had it not started in a fridge-freezer. We still do not know—because the Government have not said—whether the tests have been completed, whether it was due to a design fault or whether the construction of that model allowed the fire to take hold.

I hope that the points I have made are all relevant and are all matters for the public inquiry to consider, but some of them cannot wait until then. Certainly, the relief and rehousing of the people who have been displaced by the Grenfell fire cannot wait any longer. We are about to enter the summer recess, and I hope we do not come back in September or October to find that nothing has changed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington, because she has been thrown in at the deep end in no uncertain fashion and she has absolutely risen to the challenge. She is a strong and powerful advocate for her community, but she cannot do it all on her own; this is a job, both locally and nationally, for the Government to take hold of. We must not forget this terrible tragedy, which has blighted our country, because if we do not learn lessons from it, it will recur again.

5.59 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): May I say what an honour and pleasure it is to be back on the green Benches speaking on behalf of my constituents after a two-year enforced sabbatical? Before I speak about the subject of today's debate, I should say just a few words about my predecessor Amanda Solloway, who took my seat off me by 41 votes in 2015. She was in some ways an unusual and unlikely Conservative party candidate, coming from fairly humble origins and having herself experienced homelessness in an earlier part of her life. She made it her business to highlight the plight of homeless people and to draw attention to that really important issue, which scars our country, the fifth richest nation on the planet. Another big issue on which she fought hard was making mental health care more of a priority for the Government and ensuring that resources were made available for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) sought a collective noun for the excellent maiden speeches that have been made today—he referred to a “feast” of maiden speeches. I agree with that description of the excellent contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Leigh (Jo Platt). I am sure that they will go on to make a big contribution in this place for as long as they are here.

The origins of the catastrophic fire that occurred at Grenfell can be traced back to the neoliberal doctrine that was inflicted on our country back in 1979 and has disfigured our public services over the intervening four decades. A big feature of that approach has been deregulation, privatisation and cuts, which led to combustible materials being perfectly legitimately used on Grenfell Tower and, as we know, many other tower blocks around the country. How can that possibly be? Added into the mix is the move towards compulsory competitive tendering, which was brought into the public realm almost 40 years ago and meant that the cheapest price was all that was looked at when services were externalised. How could the maintenance of our public realm and housing stock be put out to the private sector?

Of course, if the work had been done properly and there were firestops on every floor of Grenfell Tower, as there are supposed to be, even if there had been a fire, it

[Chris Williamson]

would have been contained on the floor where it started. The combination of compulsory competitive tendering and the business-friendly inspection regime has culminated in this appalling, catastrophic fire in which so many people lost their lives.

We can also look at the cuts that have been imposed and see the number of fire safety inspectors who have been taken out of the system—between 60% and 75% depending on which fire authority we are talking about. So now the fire and rescue authorities cannot undertake the safety checks that they used to be able to carry out as a matter of course. The slapdash, corner-cutting approach that we have seen over the past few decades has ultimately led to this appalling, catastrophic fire.

There was an exchange earlier in the debate about the laissez-faire approach to student accommodation. Legislation requires new residential tower blocks over 30 metres high to have sprinklers installed in them. However, nurse and student accommodation is deemed to be “other accommodation”, so there is no requirement for sprinklers to be installed there. It is as if nurses and students are expendable—that cannot be right.

I mentioned the fire safety inspectors who have been taken out of the system, and while we are talking about cuts, it is important to remember that fire station after fire station in this capital and right across the country has been closed. Since 2010, 11,000 firefighters have lost their jobs, which I think means that one in five firefighters have effectively been removed from the system since then.

That creates its own problem. I spoke to Fire Brigades Union representatives, who talked about such things as the use of breathing apparatus. The fact is that reducing the number of firefighters available to deal with emergencies means that when we have a catastrophic fire, such as the one at Grenfell Tower, firefighters repeatedly have to go into the building to rescue people. The problem with that is that when firefighters use breathing apparatus, their blood thickens, putting them at greater risk of a coronary attack. We know from eyewitness accounts that some firefighters were entering Grenfell Tower to rescue people up to three times each. They should not have been in that situation.

When the Prime Minister was interviewed about that, she said that London fire brigade had the resources it needed and implied that the fact that it was able to respond to the fire was proof of that. But the truth is that London fire brigade did not have the resources it needed, because if it did have them, individual firefighters would not have had to enter Grenfell Tower time after time to rescue people, as there would have been enough firefighters to ensure that they each had to enter the building only once.

If we are seriously going to learn any lesson—we hear rhetoric about the importance of learning lessons from catastrophic events, but often it is just for the birds—from this dreadful fire that should never, ever have happened, surely it must be that we need a different approach to the neoliberal agenda that has influenced and informed the way in which public services have been delivered in our country. Surely we have to reverse the deregulation agenda to which we have been subjected and abandon the privatisation of our public services.

We have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber about the importance of installing sprinklers. It is an unanswerable argument. If Grenfell Tower had been fitted with sprinklers, we might have lost the building, but we would not have lost human life. I do not think that there is a building anywhere in the world that has been fitted with sprinklers in which people have died in a fire—there have been very few deaths, if any. Surely we must learn that lesson.

We should also listen very carefully to the survivors, the community and the residents who have been so affected by this appalling episode. When I spoke to somebody from the Justice4Grenfell group just yesterday, she said that they had a number of demands, including two that I hope the Minister will agree with and deliver. First, the survivors want to ensure that everybody affected is housed within the borough in decent, good-quality accommodation. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made the point that there is empty accommodation in the borough that could be acquired. The local authority in Kensington has the resources within its reserves to acquire those properties, but it seems to me that the Government are responsible and they should ensure that those resources are available.

The second thing that the survivors want is help in their present situation. The person from the Justice4Grenfell group said that she had spoken to one survivor who had been put into a hotel and just left to fend for themselves. They did not know where to go to get food or a change of clothes, so more needs to be done. There needs to be more immediate help for the survivors and, in what should be the shorter term, we should make accommodation available. I hope that the Minister will make it clear that that will happen.

When I attended a meeting of the Local Government Association Labour group fire services commission earlier this week, I was shown a paper that had been put to the fire services management committee, which included a number of recommendations. I would be interested in the Minister’s response to them. The paper said:

“Government should agree to have Sprinkler Systems fitted in All High Rise Flats in the Country”,
and that

“Any Cladding fitted to High Rise Flats should be of high quality Fire Resistant Material approved by the Fire Service to a Uniformed National Standard.”

The paper also proposes:

“The Fire Service should have overall responsibility for Fire Safety for High Rise Flats, which includes the Flats, corridors, public spaces, fire alarms, safety advice to tenants, and the Fire Service should provide Fire Safety Assurance for Residential High Rise Flats. All High Rise Blocks should be inspected by the Fire Service once every 2 years, and inspected after a major refurbishment.”

The paper goes on to say:

“New High Rise Flats should be regulated to ensure they are built to include all of the above, and in addition they should be built with two Stair Wells within the building”,
and that

“Government urgently review the fire regulation order and fully fund the Fire Service to re-enable planning and building control applications to be reviewed by Fire Safety issues on a risk assessed basis.”

Finally, the paper says:

“Government will need to recognise that extra Government financial resources will need to be made available to Fire and Rescue Services to enable them to provide for the necessary workload that this will require.”

That seems to me to be a list of common-sense requests. We should remember that it came from a cross-party group, so there are people from the Conservative party, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in the Local Government Association saying this, as well as independents. I therefore hope that the Minister will take into account what that cross-party group has said, take into account the very sensible suggestions made on both sides of the House today and, most importantly, listen to the survivors and the community and respond appropriately, because this is a stain on the very character of Great Britain. We need to learn lessons to make sure that we mean it when we say that this will never, ever happen again.

6.13 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to have sat through the whole of this debate and listened to the excellent maiden speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and for Leigh (Jo Platt)—I hope I have got them all. This has been an excellent debate, with very many important points raised and questions asked of Ministers on issues that the Government must address. I will not take up Members' time by repeating many of them.

The Grenfell fire was an appalling and, very likely, preventable tragedy, exacerbated by what seemed to me, as somebody with a bit of experience of this, the frankly dysfunctional response from Kensington and Chelsea Council in the hours, days and weeks following that terrible fire—and even now. I share all Members' concerns for the families of those who lost their lives, and those who lost their homes. I share the concerns of the emergency and frontline service workers who have had to deal with the trauma. I hope that there will be adequate long-term post-trauma support for them all, of the kind that the Government put in place immediately after the 7/7 bombings; somebody I know well is benefiting now from the support he received immediately after that.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: London fire brigade has reduced the number of its counsellors from over 10 to under five in the last seven years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should immediately be addressed, so that we offer adequate support and counselling to our service personnel?

Ruth Cadbury: That is an excellent point. Clearly fire service officers and other workers are on the frontline when it comes to experiencing trauma; we heard about that in many reports on the Lakanal fire. For such an essential service, which employs people who will experience that trauma, to be cutting specialist counselling services by half is yet another example of the impact of cuts and austerity on public services that are there for us all. Everybody should have a right to post-trauma counselling and support, whether we are talking about an employer providing it to frontline workers, or whether we are talking about members of the public who are nearby or just passing, charity workers helping out at a rescue station, or those who live in similar blocks, because as my friend has told me, it makes a real difference to people's long-term ability to function.

I have constituents, as I am sure many other Members do, who live in older council-owned tower blocks, such as Brentford Towers and the Ivybridge estate. Many have contacted me because they are frightened. They and their children cannot sleep at night. They do not want to carry on living there. They need reassurance. For some of them, the trauma is so bad that they are asking to be rehoused. This is a major issue.

I had the benefit of being briefed by London Borough of Hounslow officers and council members in the week immediately after the Grenfell fire. I have been reassured that none of the blocks in my constituency have cladding that fails the Government tests. I was also pleased to hear that on the day after the Grenfell fire, the council's programme to reclad the six towers of Brentford Towers, which people can see from the elevated section of the M4, has been put on hold while it reviews the specifics of the programme. That cladding programme is urgently needed for reasons relating to the safety of the existing external cladding and for thermal insulation, but given what has happened, it is absolutely right that the specifics of that programme be reviewed.

The leader and councillors of the London Borough of Hounslow are meeting all residents of tower blocks to hear their concerns—to listen and to respond. That is the right thing to do. The London Borough of Hounslow is also responding to requests and offering help to Kensington and Chelsea on a range of services. The council is preparing estate fire safety and improvement plans, to ensure that issues such as prevention and tackling fire safety inside and outside all tower blocks are addressed. It is also reviewing all the fire risk assessments in all blocks.

I have considerable experience as a councillor: I was lead member for housing and had lead responsibility for contingency planning. I have seen at first hand how proper fire safety mechanisms and management by residents and landlord alike can work. There was a fire at Fraser House, and sadly a resident died, but the fire did not spread through the block because the appropriate fire doors were shut and the appropriate venting was open. The fire was therefore drawn away from the other flats and out of the vents on that floor.

I understand how buildings are designed for fire safety, and how we must be careful when revising the structure, cladding and other aspects of buildings. I also understand why working with the management and the residents is so important. The reason why the fire doors at Fraser House were shut was that residents and the council worked together after the Lakanal House report was published to learn the lessons from that fire. I am regularly in and out of the Brentford Towers blocks—talking to residents, canvassing at elections and so on—and I know that on hot summer days it is tempting to prop open the fire doors. That stopped happening after the Lakanal report, however. The fire doors were regularly closed. Good management and good communication will work.

I have been the lead member for contingency planning, but thankfully I never had to deal with an emergency. I was, however, briefed to know what an emergency looked and felt like, what my role and that of senior officers would be, and how the communications links with other authorities would work, up and down the line. The way of managing in a crisis is completely different from day-to-day managing.

[Ruth Cadbury]

When I woke up that morning and started following the Twitter feed and listening to and watching the news, I was shocked at the poverty of the response from Kensington and Chelsea. To me, it smacked of inadequate preparation for an emergency. I accept that the Grenfell fire was of a different order; as others have said, it was the biggest fire in this country since wartime. Nevertheless, one of the things I would look for as an outsider is a person who is regularly in front of the cameras, listening and speaking. I would expect to see that person meeting the affected residents, the frontline workers and the charity workers. I would expect the charities and others to be responding to requests for help from the local authority, rather than having to be the sole providers of support in the hours and days after the event. But what did we see? Community centres, mosques and churches dealing with things on their own, and receiving massive amounts of good will and items that they perhaps did not need at that time; for example, there was an over-supply of blankets. They were working on their own, and they did not know what to say to all those offers of help.

I was also concerned to hear that when other local authorities, particularly those close to Kensington and Chelsea, offered that week's allocation of social rented housing to Kensington and Chelsea to use as temporary or permanent homes for those affected, there was no adequate response. Other local authorities also offered specialised, experienced trauma counsellors to Kensington and Chelsea, but there was no response. At a time when people were willing and able to go the extra mile to share with colleagues in an extreme crisis, there was nowhere for people to turn. I hope that the inquiry will look at the response of the local authority and at what it should have been. We have already heard how this can work, following reports of what happened after the terrorist attack at the Manchester concert hall. Members from Manchester have said that there was a good response from the local authority there.

The residents of Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk and their families deserve justice. All residents of tower blocks deserve reassurance, so that they can live and sleep in peace. Poor communities and those in housing need require a Government who no longer ignore them, cut vital services, and ignore the conclusions of public inquiries, and a Government who invest in adequate, good-quality, truly affordable housing.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the Front-Bench spokesmen, I ask them to split the remaining time.

6.24 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Opposition welcome today's debate, and I begin by thanking colleagues who have contributed, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Eltham (Clive Efford), for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who speaks with so much knowledge and first-hand experience of the dreadful tragedy and its aftermath, for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Derby North (Chris Williamson), and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

We heard brilliant and powerful maiden speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and for Leigh (Jo Platt). All of them showed passion and dedication. They will be doughty champions for their constituents and their constituencies in this place, and I welcome each and every one of them.

From other parts of the House, we heard from the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) and the hon. Members for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

There can be little dispute that the shock that we all felt following this tragedy has not subsided in the weeks that followed it. While the need for immediate answers is clear, we welcome the Grenfell inquiry's decision yesterday to extend the consultation period by two weeks to provide those affected with more time to respond. It is understandable that the immediate focus of the response to this tragedy has been on meeting the needs of the bereaved and the survivors, but may I urge the Government for action with regard to the neighbours and community members around Grenfell tower? We have been speaking to some of the volunteers, and they have expressed concern at the lack of access to support for the many nearby residents. These people saw the disaster develop close at hand, but some have not accessed support, either because they have not been directly approached, or because of a reluctance to do so when local services are so overwhelmed.

I pay tribute to the fire service, the police, and the community, who pulled together to assist when statutory authorities frankly failed. That is why I ask the Government to ensure that support is available to those who are volunteering after this disaster. Some volunteers are now doing a job as part of the disaster victim identification team that many of us could not imagine.

As the tragedy unfolded on 14 June, I watched an interview on one of the news channels with a resident whose property overlooked the tower. He spoke about seeing the building on fire from his kitchen, and seeing children calling for help from the windows. So many have been affected by this tragedy. We need to make sure that adequate support is in place for residents, those living in the area, those dealing with the aftermath, and the children who survived and saw things that no child should ever have to see. I want an assurance from the Government that they will ensure that those people are given every support that they need.

Similarly, residents in tower blocks throughout the UK need assurances that their homes are safe. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) was clear about where the Government need to improve. Four weeks on from this tragedy, we still need the Government to show some leadership, because concerns run deep, and run beyond the neighbourhood surrounding Grenfell. We heard today that Members across this House have been contacted by concerned constituents living in the 4,000 other tower blocks across the country. Ministers still cannot say how many of these tower blocks they consider to be

safe. In the last update given by Ministers, of the 530 tower blocks covered in aluminium composite material that have been the focus of the testing process, only 200 had actually had material tested.

We have heard that housing associations whose residents have sought assurances that their non-ACM clad buildings are safe—I have three such buildings in my constituency—have been told that the Government are refusing to check their cladding due to the current narrow focus of the testing. That is just not good enough.

Where buildings have failed safety tests, including in Salford, local authorities are unclear on how to proceed, because guidance issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government is unclear on whether cladding that fails combustibility tests requires removal, and on whether, if it does fail those tests, leaving a building unclad and open to the elements is actually a worse fire situation than leaving the cladding on.

On 3 July, the Secretary of State told the House that the panels that failed recent testing

“are ‘unlikely to be compliant’ with the limited combustibility requirement of the building regulations”.—[*Official Report*, 3 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 913.]

However, as per the explanatory note referenced by the Secretary of State, it may be possible for individual materials that do not meet limited combustibility definitions to be used where they form part of a system that does meet the requirements.

There are two ways to meet that requirement. One is to ensure that each individual component of a wall meets the criteria for limited combustibility, which is the test currently used by the Department, and the other is to ensure that the façade system meets the acceptance criteria of BR 135, following the method in BS 8414. But under the current regulatory system, even cladding that fails tests for limited combustibility can be used in developments as long as the criteria in BR 135 are met. Despite the Chancellor’s misinformed comments, the cladding used in the project at Grenfell Tower was not banned in the UK. If we are to prevent such a tragedy from happening again, it is important that we get these things right.

The fire service was among the first at the scene at Grenfell. The least we can do is ensure that it plays an important role in the forthcoming inquiry, and that its expertise is not just valued but taken on board and acted on. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, many local authorities have been undertaking safety checks and installing fire prevention systems. Many councils have gone beyond just the tower blocks by looking at public buildings such as schools and hospitals.

Some local authorities began removing cladding from their buildings after it failed the recent tests, but as I have explained, the building regulations do not necessarily reflect the documentation issued by the Department. Some housing providers have since stopped removing cladding because of that lack of direction; they do not know how, and with what materials, the cladding should be replaced. Residents are worried that inaction is leaving them vulnerable, yet without guidance, local authorities are unsure how best to act. Leadership on this issue has not been forthcoming from the Secretary of State, who has instead passed the buck to landlords, in conjunction with fire services, so that they take decisions on building safety.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne, the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, noted in his opening remarks, this is not the first time that the Government have failed to take responsibility for safety. He referred to the words of the former Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who said it was the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government, to encourage the installation of sprinkler systems.

Members on both sides of the House, including the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire and the hon. Member for Southend West, have called for the retrofitting of sprinklers. I urge the Minister to consult the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group on that, because there is an urgent need to ensure that all buildings—public buildings and housing—are fire-safe.

I commend Labour-led Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, one of two councils covering my constituency, on agreeing to retrofit sprinklers in all Stockport Homes tower blocks. That is down to the work of Councillor Sheila Bailey in particular. Similar commitments have been made by other local authorities of all political persuasions.

Ministers need to clarify an important matter. They have not given any real commitment to local authorities. The First Secretary of State has announced that the Government are prepared to fund these measures only in certain circumstances. That basically means that already cash-strapped local authorities will have to either find more money that they just do not have or cut services elsewhere. Unless the Government explain how they will make resources available to local authorities to do those works, and what “stepping in” means in practical terms, that is a bit of an empty promise.

Mr Betts: I raised that issue in the debate. I asked the Secretary of State in a written question to set out the criteria against which applications for additional funding will be assessed. The answer I got was “that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period.”

That is a rather empty answer, is it not, to a very pressing problem?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely, and I am afraid it speaks volumes. Unless the Minister, in summing up, can explain how local authorities are going to get that resource, the fact is that councils in my hon. Friend’s constituency and many others across this country will not have the financial means to address the issue. They need certainty that they will receive some recompense from central Government.

I want to turn quickly to governance. We heard today that the taskforce sent in to advise Kensington and Chelsea Council lacked the powers necessary to co-ordinate what needed to be done following this disaster, and about the deficit in local leadership. As the First Secretary of State has said, the taskforce can advise, but it cannot act. Surely that is an issue of real concern, because Kensington and Chelsea Council just was not up to the job of dealing with a disaster of this magnitude. The way in which it responded was, quite frankly, not acceptable in any sense of the term. There is very real concern about not only how the local authority handled the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, but its shortcomings over the following days and weeks.

[*Andrew Gwynne*]

Having spoken to those offering support to survivors, I understand that there are very real concerns that the uptake of financial support is still not what it should be. I appreciate that Ministers have given assurances that benefits will not be affected, but the lack of trust that some continue to have in their elected representatives locally has led to a number refusing support. That needs to be addressed at a local level.

On the council's ability to deal with this type of emergency, it has emerged that there are serious shortcomings in its contingency planning and management, yet the Government have not been good enough at the job of intervening. People are still in need of support services and rehousing. It appears that the Government have acknowledged the council's serious failings, because they sent in a taskforce, but at this crucial time, they have left in charge those who failed the residents in the first place. Today, we heard the new leader of the council state that she has never before been inside a high-rise council block. What a farce!

On 1 July, Labour called for commissioners to be sent in to take control of the situation, warning that trust among the local community will not be rebuilt by a leader, deputy leader or other politicians unless there is a major shake-up in governance. I repeat the call that we made on 1 July: local people want to know that the Government are taking control; that there will be a shake-up in the management and governance of Kensington and Chelsea Council; and that the situation will be closely monitored and managed directly by commissioners who are answerable to the Secretary of State and to Parliament, until the local authority has the necessary capacity, is fit for purpose, and is fit to govern in the interests of all the residents of Kensington and Chelsea.

Until we can guarantee that all those who lost their homes are in secure accommodation, until support is available for all who need it, and until the public are again able to trust the elected representatives in Kensington and Chelsea Council, we will repeat our call for commissioners to take over the running of the council. Changes need to be made to laws, to regulations and in the governance of the council, and they must be made based on the evidence we have now, as well as on the additional evidence from the inquiry. We urge the Government to make this happen swiftly; if they do, they will have our support.

6.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): We have had a detailed and wide-ranging debate on the Grenfell Tower public inquiry, but I start by congratulating all the Members who made their maiden speeches today: the hon. Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Leigh (Jo Platt) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones).

We heard some incredibly powerful speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and we of course heard from the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who

has been very involved in dealing with the residents and has been part of the response.

We also heard from various members of the all-party group on fire safety: my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I can tell the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), that I met them recently to hear their views. They will be writing to me in some detail to set out what they want to see happen in the inquiry.

Colleagues have had an opportunity to express a range of views—some obviously different from others—but the House is today united in the view that ultimately the people who matter the most are those who have been affected directly by this terrible tragedy. They must have their questions answered, and that is precisely what the inquiry will do.

In his opening remarks, the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), said that he will not rest until the residents have the help they need, until we get to the bottom of what happened, and until we make sure that this never happens again. I assure him that I, too, will not rest until all three of those conditions are met, and nor will the Secretary of State or, indeed, any colleague in this House.

I again put on record my deepest condolences to all those who have suffered such great loss as a result of this fire, which we all agree should never have happened. Colleagues from all parties have paid tribute to the victims, their families and the heroism of the emergency services, and I know that such heart-felt views will be heard and echoed throughout the country. This debate has provided an opportunity to reflect on the scale and human cost of this tragedy, but it has also given us a valuable chance to start to look ahead to what comes next—principally, the public inquiry that will establish precisely what went wrong, why and who is responsible.

Colleagues have raised a range of issues, and before I continue with my speech I shall take a few minutes to respond to some of them. On the help available to those who are directly affected, Members will know that we have made first offers to all those who are ready to have such offers made to them. A large number of second offers have been made, and 19 of the families have now accepted an offer. I just point out that, as I know Opposition Members have acknowledged, we need to go at the pace that the families want us to go at. That is incredibly important. I know that some of them will want to move into permanent homes rather than into temporary homes, and we accept that. We have had a discussion about Kensington Row, and I hope we will soon be in a position where we can start viewings of the flats there. We are also looking to secure similar accommodation so that we have net additions to the social housing, rather than take up homes that others might have occupied. The key thing is that nobody is going to be forced into a home that they do not want to go to.

On funding, I can report that 120 of the households have received a grant of £5,000, and many others have also received the £500 cash payment. In total, almost £4 million has been paid out from the discretionary fund. Colleagues have raised issues relating to trauma support, which of course is being made available to those who need it. Given the exceptional nature of the

incident, we have agreed that MOPAC—Mayor's Office for Policing And Crime—funding will be used for this, even though no crime as such has been committed that we are aware of.

We heard a discussion on the Government's response and the testing regime that we have put in place. The Secretary of State has led right from the start on that. I have been by his side, so I can tell Members that he has led on it. I ask hon. Members to look on the Government website because it will tell them about all the letters we have written to local authorities and housing associations, and all the tests that we have suggested are done. Yes, 211 tests have come back as positive—or negative; it depends on how one looks at it—but I just say that we are working with the Local Government Association and others to encourage housing associations, local councils and private landlords to send in the cladding for testing. What I say to every Member here, as they can help with this, is that I know they will be in touch with their local authorities and housing associations, so please help us. They should ask their local—

Ms Buck: For clarity, will the Minister confirm that half or more of all the high-rise towers identified at the earlier point in this discussion have not submitted materials to be tested? That is the clear implication of what he was saying.

Alok Sharma: I am saying that we want to get this testing done as quickly as possible. We have the resources available for that. Let me just say that there are some cases where local authorities will have sent in one piece of cladding for testing from a building and may have had a number of buildings that were re-clad at a similar time, so we are hoping to establish whether that is the case or not. An awful lot of work is going on, and I just recommend to right hon. and hon. Members that they look on the website as it will tell them, in great detail, what the expert advisory panel is doing and it will tell them about all the tests that have been carried out.

Members have also talked about insulation, and of course when we wrote to local authorities on 22 June we asked them also to look at that. On 6 July, the independent expert panel announced that it would be recommending wider systems checks of cladding, and that it would be testing a combination of ACM panels with two of the most commonly used insulation materials as well.

We had a discussion about building regulations, and I respectfully point out that they were put together in 2006, not when the current Government were in place, so this idea that somehow deregulation has played a part is unfair. Let me also make reference to the Lakanal House fire and what the coroner wanted to happen. The coroner recommended simplifying the fire safety guidance under the building regulations, not a change in the standards. I accept that that has not happened as yet, but clearly in the light of this tragedy we need to reflect on the previous plans for consulting. Clearly, if anything emerges from the investigation where we need to take immediate action, we will do that.

The expert advisory panel, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has appointed, is considering a range of matters, particularly whether there are any immediate additional actions that need to be taken to ensure the safety of existing high-rise buildings.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister for his comments about high-rise buildings. Will he clarify whether the testing and the regulation-reviewing that the Government are undertaking also extend to other buildings that may be affected, such as schools and hospitals?

Alok Sharma: Yes, I can. That work is ongoing.

There was a discussion about the independent recovery taskforce, which was appointed by the Secretary of State. Let me point out that if we had gone down the road of appointing commissioners, that would have been a statutory intervention, which would have taken longer. Our view is that we need to get people in there now and to focus particularly on housing regeneration and community engagement. People from that taskforce will report directly to the Secretary of State.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister enlighten us on who they are and where they are?

Alok Sharma: That information will be published very shortly.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith talked about product safety. The Government have a working group on product recalls and safety, which has been asked, as a matter of urgency, to review its final report in the light of the Grenfell Tower tragedy.

Finally, on social housing, I know that we will have opportunities to debate these matters in the months and possibly years ahead, but may I just point out to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne, that, during the period of 1997 to 2010, the number of social rented homes fell by 420,000. Since 2010, we have delivered 333,000 new affordable homes. [*Interruption.*] That is a debate for another day. May I just return to the public inquiry?

Mr Betts: The Minister did say “finally”, but he has not yet come back to the issue of what funding will be available to other local authorities carrying out this essential work and what criteria will be used to assess any funding applications.

Alok Sharma: The Secretary of State and other Ministers have been absolutely clear: we do not want local authorities and housing associations to stop doing anything that is necessary to keep people safe. If they do not have the funding, we will work with them on the funding process.

Clive Efford rose—

Alok Sharma: No, I will not give way as I really must get on.

A range of views have been expressed about the cause of the Grenfell Tower tragedy. What is vital is that we have a full independent public inquiry with a remit that goes way beyond the design, construction and modification of the building itself. An effective and prompt inquiry will necessarily have to follow defined terms of reference, and setting those is obviously crucial. The terms will be set formally by the Prime Minister, but she will do so following recommendations from the chair of the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick. Sir Martin was appointed to head up the inquiry on 29 June and on that very day he visited the site and spoke with some of those who had been affected by the tragedy. Sir Martin has been absolutely clear in his desire to consult the affected

[Alok Sharma]

residents about what the terms of the reference should be. I know that he has been meeting them to hear their views. He has also said that he welcomes the views from the wider community. Those are the actions of a person who wants proactively to engage with those directly affected right from the start. I urge hon. Members who have concerns or ideas about the terms of the inquiry to raise them with the team. The details are available on the inquiry website: grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk.

During today's debate, some concern has been expressed about Sir Martin's suitability for the role, but as the First Secretary of State has said, he is independently appointed, extremely well qualified and totally impartial. Sir Martin is a hugely experienced former Court of Appeal judge. Judges decide cases solely on the evidence presented in court and in accordance with the law. As a senior judge, Sir Martin has worked across a range of cases. There have been cases where Sir Martin has been praised by civil liberties lawyers and cases where he has found in favour of housing association tenants, but in each case he will have made decisions based on the law and the evidence—nothing more, and nothing less.

Opposition Members may be aware that from December 2005 to December 2009, Sir Martin was chair of the legal services consultative panel, which advises successive Lord Chancellors on the regulation and training of lawyers, legal services and other related matters. The Lord Chancellors whom he served were Lord Falconer and Jack Straw. I have previously noted in this House that it is vital for Government, central and local, to work hard to win the trust of those people directly affected by this tragedy. I have no doubt that Sir Martin is similarly aware that he needs to foster that trust. I am sure that, as his dialogue with the local community continues, they will note that his only motivation is to get to the bottom of what happened.

I assure hon. Members that the Government will co-operate fully with the inquiry, and I hope that the same will be true of the local authority and any other individual or body whose work falls within the inquiry's remit. It is absolutely vital that no stone is left unturned and that anyone who has done wrong has nowhere to hide. To help get to the truth, survivors of the fire and the families of the victims will receive funding for legal representation at the inquiry. Details of how they access that legal funding will follow once the inquiry is up and running.

Some concern has been raised about the lack of a coroner's inquest into the deaths at Grenfell. Let me assure colleagues that there will be an inquest. The coroner is already investigating the deaths; that is a statutory duty. The police-led investigation is already under way in conjunction with the London Fire Brigade and the Health and Safety Executive. The police investigation will consider potential criminal liability. The police have been very clear: arrests will follow if any evidence of criminal wrongdoing is found. Unlike a coroner's inquest, a full, judge-led public inquiry will allow us to look at the broader circumstances leading up to and surrounding the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower.

It will also allow us to take any action necessary as quickly as possible to prevent a similar tragedy from happening again.

A number of colleagues have expressed concerns about timing. Of course, we want the inquiry to be completed as quickly as possible and the main priority will be to establish the facts of what action is needed to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. It will be for Sir Martin to determine the timescale for the inquiry, but I am certain that he will be aware of the universal desire for an interim report to be published at the earliest opportunity.

In cases of some past disasters, such as Hillsborough and the sinking of the *Marchioness*, it took far too long for the whole story of what happened to emerge. We do not want that to be the case with Grenfell Tower. That was why the Prime Minister ordered a full public inquiry as soon as the scale of the tragedy became apparent. Regardless of politics or ideology and of what we think is the best course of action, all of us here want one thing: the truth. It might prove uncomfortable for some and it might not fit the preconception of others, but the truth must come out. I am confident that Sir Martin Moore-Bick will see that the truth does come out. The survivors of the Grenfell fire and the families of those who were lost deserve no less.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Grenfell Tower fire inquiry.

Mr Speaker: We will soon come to the matter for which a good many Members are probably waiting—I rather imagine they are; if they are not, they should be. They could be awaiting the Adjournment debate with eager anticipation, bated breath and beads of sweat upon their brows, but quite a lot are probably waiting for the announcement of the results of the elections for Chairs of Select Committees. Before we come to those, I will take a point of order from Jenny Chapman.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House is aware that the repeal Bill is to be published tomorrow morning. Disconcertingly, the Labour party has received reports that the press is to be briefed on its contents this evening. Mr Speaker, have you received any notice from the Government that a Minister intends to come to this House at the earliest opportunity to make a statement as to the contents of the Bill? If not, could you please advise me on how we might be able to bring the contents of the Bill to the attention of the House before 21 July?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I have received no indication of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on the matter tomorrow. However, it is perfectly open to the hon. Lady and her colleagues to ensure that they have a default position so that if no ministerial statement is proffered, they could at least give themselves the chance of an urgent question. I cannot offer any guarantee as to whether such a question would be selected, but it can be selected, by definition, only if it is submitted. In so far as the hon. Lady seeks my advice, that is my advice without prejudice.

Speaker's Statement: Select Committee Chairs

7 pm

Mr Speaker: We come now to the announcement of the results for the election of Chairs of Select Committees. Nominations for the 27 elected Select Committee Chairs and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee closed on Friday 7 July, and elections were held by secret ballot today. No ballot was necessary for 17 Committees for which a single nomination had been received, as follows:

<i>Committee</i>	<i>Elected</i>
Culture, Media and Sport	Damian Collins
Environmental Audit	Mary Creagh
Exiting the European Union	Hilary Benn
Health	Dr Sarah Wollaston
Home Affairs	Yvette Cooper
International Development	Stephen Twigg
International Trade	Angus Brendan MacNeil
Justice	Robert Neill
Petitions	Helen Jones
Procedure	Mr Charles Walker
Public Accounts	Meg Hillier
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs	Mr Bernard Jenkin
Scottish Affairs	Pete Wishart
Standards	Sir Kevin Barron
Welsh Affairs	David T.C. Davies
Women and Equalities	Mrs Maria Miller
Work and Pensions	Frank Field

I say what I am about to say principally for the benefit of people attending to our proceedings outwith

the Chamber. What I have just said means that those named individuals have been elected or—I think in every case—re-elected as Chairs of those Select Committees. In the contested elections, a total of 587 ballot papers were submitted, the ballots being counted under the alternative vote system. The following candidates were elected:

<i>Committee</i>	<i>Elected</i>
Backbench Business	Ian Mearns
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	Rachel Reeves
Communities and Local Government	Clive Betts
Defence	Dr Julian Lewis
Education	Robert Halfon
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	Neil Parish
Foreign Affairs	Tom Tugendhat
Northern Ireland Affairs	Dr Andrew Murrison
Science and Technology	Norman Lamb
Transport	Lilian Greenwood
Treasury	Nicky Morgan

The full breakdown of voting in each contest, indicating the votes attributable to each candidate after each redistribution of the votes of eliminated candidates is set out in a paper, shortly available on the Parliament website, and from the Vote Office. The Members so elected take up their positions formally when their Committee has been nominated by the House. I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members concerned. May I, with the concurrence of the House, thank all those candidates who took part in the elections? If I may say so, this is the somewhat more democratic House of Commons in 2017 by comparison with an earlier era.

Redundancy Modification Orders

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

7.4 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) rose—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am saddened by the speedy exit—

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): But not surprised.

Mr Speaker: But not surprised, says the First Secretary of State. I am saddened by the speedy exit of large numbers of Members. If there are so many Members who wish to leave and who do not wish to hear the oration of the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) on the subject of redundancy modification orders—a quite unaccountable departure on their part—I hope that they will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly so that the rest of us can listen to the oration of the hon. Gentleman.

Martyn Day: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for allowing me this opportunity to raise the issue of redundancy modification orders—or, to use the full Sunday name, the Redundancy Payments (Continuity of Employment in Local Government, etc.) (Modification) Order 1999.

As the name implies, the order acts to preserve continuity of employment where an employee moves between certain local government, and indeed some other identified, positions. Pretty much every type of job that once belonged to the local government family is covered by the RMO, with a wide range of bodies listed. To illustrate that, the list already includes bodies in my constituency, such as West Lothian Leisure Ltd, and others including the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Scottish Water, the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and the Scottish Social Services Council, to name just a few.

I refer Members to the order’s explanatory notes, which describe its effect quite clearly:

“The Order modifies certain provisions of the Employment Rights Act 1996 concerning redundancy payments, in their application to persons employed by certain local government employers or other employers in related sectors. The modifications have the effect that the employment of such a person by more than one such employer may be treated as if it were continuous for the purposes of those provisions; and re-engagement of such a person, or an offer of re-engagement made to such a person, by any such employer is treated as if it were re-engagement, or as if the offer had been made, by that person’s employer.”

In ordinary language, that means that the order deems certain successive employments as continuous, and the provisions of the Employment Rights Act 1996 would apply as if the individual had been employed by the same employer throughout the entire period.

If an employee under notice of redundancy receives a job offer from another listed body on the modification order and starts the new role within four weeks of the end of their old job, they are considered to have continuity of employment. If an employee decides during the first four weeks not to continue with the new job, they will be able to terminate the contract, and they would be

entitled to receive any redundancy payments from the old employer. However, no continuous service accrued under the redundancy modification order applies to anything other than the redundancy payment. Such continuous service fails to entitle employees to any additional annual leave or other benefit over and above that of their contractual entitlements.

While the order treats certain types of successive employments as continuous, it does not preserve continuity if there is a break in service. The order has been amended a number of times to include new employments, with the last amendment being in 2015.

The crux of the issue, and the reason for this debate, is the lack of progress made on updating the order, and the impacts of this on employees’ rights and continuous service benefits—benefits such as pension and annual leave entitlement, as well as the calculation of redundancy payments. Many terms and conditions of local government employment are linked to continuous service, so the impact of changing employers extends far beyond redundancy rights, affecting other entitlements, such as sickness allowance and maternity pay.

The lack of an update to the order means that a number of organisations across the UK have yet to be included in the order, despite applying for inclusion—in some cases, several years ago. One such organisation is the Falkirk Community Trust, which applied for inclusion shortly after its establishment in 2011. Its application has been considered, and the trust has been approved for inclusion in the schedule of bodies in the order. To date, this inclusion has not taken place and has been beset with delays.

The Government stated in 2015 that the order would be updated in due course. As the House will be aware, the Department for Communities and Local Government administers the local government redundancy modification order on behalf of the UK Government and the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales. I have been told in answer to parliamentary questions that the Department is

“actively looking at options on taking forward the Redundancy Modification Order and will update relevant organisations in due course.”

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about this important issue for employees. Has he had any indication from the Government of why this is taking so long and when it will be resolved?

Martyn Day: That is indeed a question that I shall be coming to, and one that I have asked by way of written questions and in letters to Ministers. I hope that this Minister will answer it tonight.

In November last year, I wrote to Ministers in the Department for Communities and Local Government asking them to set a firm timescale for updating the order. The response that I received was completely unsatisfactory: it gave no explanation for the delays, and made no firm commitment to updating the order within any definitive timescale. It is now 2017 and no updates have been made, which leaves many employees throughout the country in a kind of limbo, not knowing whether their continuous service will be recognised. Indeed, literally thousands of local government workers may be unaware that they could be affected by this lack of action if they were to move posts.

One such person is my constituent Jill Kernan, who first made me aware of this issue—and I am grateful to her for doing so. Jill has worked in local government for more than 20 years, and because she has transferred between employers on occasion, her case very much highlights the problem. In 2013 her employer at the time, North Lanarkshire Council, formed an arm's-length company called North Lanarkshire Properties LLP. The small number of staff, and Unison, which was representing staff in the TUPE process, were assured that addition to the order was a formality, and would happen imminently. Given how relatively straightforward the process should be, that assurance did not seem unreasonable. Life, however, is seldom as straightforward as we would expect, and when Jill took up a new post with Falkirk Council early last year, she discovered that the arm's-length company—and, indeed, many others—had still not been informed of the decision on addition to the order. Consequently, Jill has lost continuation of service. She and others like her need to know when a decision will be made, and whether it will be retrospective.

The right not to be unfairly dismissed and the right to a redundancy payment require two years' continuous service, and workers affected by these delays in updating the order clearly risk losing those rights. While I hope that the situation can be resolved retrospectively, I am left wondering what happens to anyone who is made redundant during this limbo period. The redundancy modification order has undoubtedly had a huge impact on Jill's continuous-service benefits, including pension and annual leave entitlement as well as other service-related conditions. Quite simply, that is not good enough: our public sector staff deserve to be treated better. There are more than enough challenges in the local government and public sector environment without managers and staff having to investigate and try to sort out staff conditions and benefits when people are changing jobs in such circumstances.

In recent years, local government has had to come up with many innovative and effective ways of making efficiency savings and streamlining the delivery of public services, and the creation of arm's-length companies has been a regular feature of that process the length and breadth of the UK. Many Members will have, for example, culture or leisure trusts in their constituencies which have been set up in the last few years. I wonder how many of those are included in the current RMO, and how many are—as in my own local experience—still awaiting inclusion. The number of new companies of that kind, and consequently the number of affected workers, are likely to continue to increase.

The frequency of updates of the order to include new employments is simply not keeping pace with the reality of life in the public sector, and those affected are very frustrated by that. I share their frustration with the Government in this regard, and I have a number of questions to ask. Why is the process taking so long? When will it be resolved? What will be done to sort the problem out retrospectively so that hard-working constituents who have been affected by the delays do not potentially lose out? In particular, how can we ensure that those affected can reclaim any lost benefits when the RMO finally catches up with the new employments?

The redundancy modification order is a key instrument in protecting the terms and conditions of local government workers, and its timeous updating should be given a

higher priority than it has been given by this Government. I also think that Ministers should consider the preservation of other length-of-service benefits such as annual leave and sick pay entitlements, and not just that of redundancy pay.

As I mentioned earlier, the Department for Communities and Local Government administers the order on behalf of the devolved Administrations. I therefore suggest that, given that legislative competency over local government is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, it might make sense to devolve the administration of the redundancy modification order to Scotland as well. I should like to hear the Minister's opinion of that suggestion.

I look forward to the Minister's response, and to his answers to my questions.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for raising this issue and for giving me the opportunity to respond. The redundancy modification order for local government is a statutory instrument that allows local government employees to carry over their employment service when they move between employers within the local government family. The order covers England, Scotland and Wales.

The redundancy modification order lists those bodies that provide local authority functions as associated employers for the purposes of statutory redundancy payments. For an individual working in local government, this means that their employment service with any body listed in the order can be used to calculate their redundancy payment, if the individual is made redundant. The order brings local government in line with arrangements for other associated employers under the Employment Rights Act 1996—for example the civil service, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech.

Employment matters under the Employment Rights Act would usually be administered by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. However, given that the redundancy modification order's focus is on local government, it was decided in 2009 that the Department for Communities and Local Government would be best placed to take the lead on this matter. That is why I am responding to the House this evening.

The redundancy modification order generally enjoys broad support in the local government sector. It is part of the local government employment rights framework, and when seeking to outsource services and other operations, local authorities will often apply for the new body to be covered by the order.

The redundancy modification order has been in place since 1983, and it was last consolidated into one piece of legislation in 1999. Since then, a number of separate orders have added new bodies to the list of associated bodies. It is fair to say that over that time the order has become a rather untidy piece of legislation. It is unwieldy, and it is often difficult for people both in local and central Government to navigate or administer.

It is also clear that more could be done to ensure that the current criteria and processes used by the Government to add new bodies to the redundancy modification order are far more open and transparent. For those reasons, the order is under review. Any review must ensure that the redundancy modification order is not

[*Mr Marcus Jones*]

over-burdensome in processes or future costs. I would like to ensure that the order is focused on core local government services and functions, and that it delivers good value for money for taxpayers.

There are a number of outstanding applications for bodies that are waiting to be added to the redundancy modification order, including several Scottish bodies, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Many of those bodies have been waiting some time to know whether they will be added and therefore become an associated employer. I offer my apologies to those bodies for the delay in providing them with an answer. As I have already stated, however, the redundancy modification order is currently under review.

The hon. Gentleman described the effect on his constituent of the redundancy modification order and the review that is currently taking place. I would be grateful if he would write to me with more information about that case as I am very interested to hear more about it.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government intend to devolve some of the redundancy modification order's functions to the Scottish Government. As I am sure he will know, the Scottish Government have approached DCLG Ministers with a proposal that the functions be transferred under section 63 of the Scotland Act 1998. That would effectively remove the need for my Department's officials to consider applications for inclusion in the order and also remove Ministers in my Department from the decision making.

I am alert to the fact that the Scottish Government have good reasons for proposing that change, and I understand that a number of other wide-ranging public sector reforms have been made in Scotland recently, such as the introduction of integrated health and social care partnership arrangements across Scotland. That is one of the Scottish Government's flagship public sector reform policies, so I am sure they are keen to ensure that the transition to the new arrangements is implemented as smoothly as possible. However, Her Majesty's Government have a clear position on employment matters—they are reserved. As such, the DCLG has no plans to devolve any functions of the redundancy modification order to the Scottish Government. That decision was communicated to the Secretary of State

for Scotland just before the general election, and I am happy to write directly to Scottish Government Ministers to confirm it.

Martyn Day: I thank the Minister for those answers, although obviously I am disappointed with the position on devolution. Will he address my point about how timely the order can be updated? A wait of more than six years for some Scottish organisations is utterly unacceptable.

Mr Jones: I will respond to the hon. Gentleman's point in a moment, but first I would like to finish my point about the Scottish Government's request for the matter to be devolved. I am keen to work with them to explore the matter further, and particularly to identify whether any other options are available to achieve a successful outcome for all parties. I therefore propose that, in the first instance, my officials and their counterparts from the Scotland Office and the Scottish Government meet as soon as possible so that officials can better understand the Scottish Government's concerns.

Finally, I will respond to a couple of the hon. Gentleman's points about the review. As I said, the order is still under review. I understand his frustration with that, but it is important that we get it right. He is right that the matter could have come before the House sooner, but we have just had a general election, and as a consequence my Department is dealing with a number of policies. In particular, we heard in the previous debate about some of the challenges that it has had as a consequence of the awful Grenfell fire. We are in the process of looking at the order, but we have to prioritise certain things.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the updating of the redundancy modification order could be retrospective. That question will have to be answered through the review.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking the time to raise this important matter, and I would be grateful if he provided me with further details of the constituent he mentioned. As I have said, we will take forward the review in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 13 July 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Local Transport Projects: Funding

1. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide funding for large local major transport projects. [900451]

11. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide funding for large local major transport projects. [900461]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Before I start, may I welcome the new members of the Labour Front-Bench team to their positions? I also congratulate the new Chair of the Select Committee on Transport, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), on her success in the election yesterday.

Under the large local majors programme, the Department has already given two schemes the go-ahead. We are currently looking at the case to approve up to four more and are funding development of a further 13 schemes that will be considered in the near future. Last week, we announced the creation of a major road network that will enable an even greater number of local road improvement projects to come forward. The details of that scheme will be consulted on later this year.

Luke Hall: The road to nowhere in Yate was built in the 1970s and was abandoned. It is now used as a film set. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the road should be reopened? What financial assistance is his Department making available for projects such as that, which would dramatically reduce congestion in Yate?

Chris Grayling: Having walked the road to nowhere with my hon. Friend, I rather agree that it would be better if it had genuine motorists on it, rather than ones in soap operas. I hope that he will continue to encourage his local enterprise partnership and others to bring forward proposals for that road. Through the growth fund, we provide support for schemes such as that. The scheme may also be eligible for consideration as part of the major road network, depending on the connectivity

at either end, but I commend him for his work on the issue. I rather agree that it would be better if the road were open for motorists.

Michael Tomlinson: As you know, Mr Speaker, Dorset is a wonderful place to live, work and visit, but Dorset's roads, including the A350, north-south, and the A31, east-west, do become congested, especially in the summer months. What assurances can the Secretary of State give me and my constituents that major infrastructure projects in Dorset are a priority for the Government?

Chris Grayling: There are two ways in which I hope we can deliver support for my hon. Friend and his constituents. For those parts of the strategic road network that run through Dorset, Highways England is currently reviewing needs and looking at what the next generation of projects should be. There is also the creation of the major road network and the opportunity to develop far more bypasses. I think that will play an important role in places such as Dorset, where many towns suffer intensive through traffic and are not suited to such traffic.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Tyne and Wear Metro customers are affected daily by failing trains; it has the lowest performance level of any equivalent system in the UK; that includes the oldest rolling stock on the London underground. That is largely due to the fact that the metro is well past the 35 years for which it was designed. Is the Secretary of State aware of the situation? When will he provide the funds to replace the fleet?

Chris Grayling: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his re-election as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. I am well aware of the issue that he has raised. I recognise the importance of the metro to Newcastle and the Newcastle area. I am pleased that, in the last few years, we have put several hundred million pounds of investment into the network. My Department is looking very carefully at what the best options are. I understand the need to make changes, so that the metro can carry on serving people in the way it has in the past.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State commit to supporting the Welsh Government's plans by providing a comprehensive funding package for the South Wales Metro?

Chris Grayling: Of course, central Government are providing a substantial contribution to the South Wales Metro. I have also extended an offer to the Welsh Government to enable them to take over that infrastructure, so that they can run a truly integrated service on that route. I am waiting with interest to see what plans they bring forward to make that vision a reality.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is 30 years since Crossrail and the Thameslink upgrade project were first proposed. Does my right hon. Friend welcome the fact that it is a Conservative Government who have seen those projects make such progress towards completion in a few months?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am very excited by Crossrail, not only because of what it will deliver for London but because it is the

biggest engineering project of its kind in Europe. I hope that we will be able to build on that expertise, and that UK plc will take advantage of what has been done by winning contracts internationally. When it opens next year, Thameslink will make a real difference to passengers to the north and south. I am proud of what we are achieving.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to my constituency during the general election campaign. What does he intend to do about the terrible transport infrastructure investment and the inequality that exists between London and the north-east, resulting in £1,943 per person being spent in London and just £220 per person being spent in the north-east? I do not begrudge London that investment, but people in North West Durham are as important.

Chris Grayling: I have never doubted that. Of course, the balance between regions will depend on what projects are happening at the time. The hon. lady will have seen in our manifesto the commitment to the northern powerhouse rail programme, which will mean a significant change in the balance. I am waiting for Transport for the North to come forward with its recommendations on the form that should take. There are other benefits for her constituency. It will see the arrival in the very near future of a new generation of express trains on the east coast main line, which will be vastly better than her constituents have at the moment.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The Gibb report put forward a solid business case for the electrification of the Uckfield line, which runs through my constituency of Wealden. Will the Secretary of State meet me and local campaigners to get this project on track?

Chris Grayling: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I absolutely recognise the issue. The other part of deliberations around the Uckfield line is the private-sector proposal, which I have said we will happily look at, to create BML2—the Brighton main line 2. We should look at all these things in the round and ask what is the best future for that route, but I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Why does not the Secretary of State for Transport tell his friends that some of these so-called projects are pie in the sky from a Government who are already committed to spending more than £80 billion on High Speed 2, under which there are going to be two tracks through Derbyshire—not one, but two: one a slow track and one a fast track? Why does he not get real and understand that there should be a reassessment of HS2? He only has a tiny majority, and believe me, a lot of Members on both sides of this House are fed up with the idea of spending money in the far distant future on HS2 when there are all these projects on today's Order Paper on which they want action.

Chris Grayling: I am very surprised that the hon. Gentleman is opposing a scheme that will deliver capacity improvements and journey improvements between the great cities of the north, and link Birmingham to Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds, and that will make a real difference economically to the areas he represents. It is a project that is overwhelmingly supported by those who represent those communities in the north.

Airports/Ports: Effect of Leaving EU

2. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the potential effect on passenger capacity at airports and ports of the UK leaving the EU. [900452]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My Department is working closely with a number of other Departments, including the Home Office, to ensure that ports, airports and other transport operators are fully prepared for when we leave the EU. I am committed to putting passengers at the heart of our transport policy, and that will certainly apply to the arrangements that exist when we leave the EU.

David Linden: Brexit will present profound challenges for immigration at our ports and airports, but the Tourism Industry Council forecasts that there should be a 200% increase in resources for the UK Border Force while in effect there has been a 15% cut, despite an 11% increase in passenger numbers. How does the Secretary of State square that circle, and how can we ensure that we will have passenger safety after Brexit?

Chris Grayling: Our ambition after Brexit is to have borders that function as closely as possible to the way they currently do. We do not want to deter tourists or businesspeople from coming to the country. Having a managed migration system does not mean that we suddenly have to create barriers to tourists, and that is not our intention.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State did not provide any substance in that answer on the discussions he is having. Some 23 million inbound passengers from the EU pass through UK airports each year, and they are processed quickly using special lanes and scanning. What funding has the Secretary of State identified is required for infrastructure and resources to avoid queues for those coming here? He might also be aware that the EU is planning an ESTA-type visa system for non-EU citizens, so has he had discussions about the impact of that when the UK leaves the EU?

Chris Grayling: Of course, we have discussions all the time across the Government about post-EU exit arrangements—we had a Committee meeting to that effect yesterday—but as I said to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), it is not our intention or desire to erect barriers at the borders, for tourists arriving, for example. Indeed, we are investing in things like automated gates to speed the flow through our borders, and we will carry on doing things like that.

Alan Brown: Another potential impact on passenger capacity is the negative impact if the UK does not remain part of the open skies agreement. That is very important for regional airports such as Prestwick, adjacent to my constituency. The Prime Minister said this week that she had discussions with President Trump on open skies, but can the Secretary of State provide an assurance that the UK will remain part of open skies and the single aviation market?

Chris Grayling: I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that I am absolutely confident that after we have left the EU there will be an open skies agreement

with the United States. I have had discussions with my US counterpart; there is an absolute desire on both sides of the Atlantic to make sure that the aviation arrangements remain as they are at the moment.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Can the Minister clarify that on leaving the EU we will remain members of the European Aviation Safety Agency, so as to maintain and grow our passenger capacity in accordance with our economic needs?

Chris Grayling: Obviously the details will come out in the negotiations, but we want to continue to collaborate with our European partners on air safety issues, just as we do with other organisations around the world, such as the US Federal Aviation Administration, and I see nothing to suggest that that will change after we leave.

Karl Turner: But have we not already seen this Government's shocking acceptance of departing from EASA safety standards by condoning the wet-leasing of Qatar Airways services to replace the poverty-paid British Airways mixed-fleet crews, in which the substitute crews' hours will not be subject to the safety standards prescribed by EASA?

Chris Grayling: I am sure that all the international airlines that operate into and out of the United Kingdom maintain proper safety standards. They are subject to regulation at European and international levels, and they would not be able to use UK airports if we were not confident that they were safe airlines to fly with.

Mr Speaker: I call Lloyd Russell-Moyle. Not here. I wish he were here. I hope the fellow is all right. Anyway, we move on. I call Rachel Maclean.

Cycling and Walking

4. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What measures his Department is taking to encourage cycling and walking. [900454]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): The Government very much seek to make cycling and walking the natural choices for short journeys, or as part of a longer journey. In April this year we published the first-ever statutory cycling and walking investment strategy for England. The strategy details our plans for increasing cycling and walking and identifies £1.2 billion of funding, which may be invested until 2021.

Rachel Maclean: I very much thank my hon. Friend for his response. My constituency has many footpaths, cut-throughs and small tracks that link our green spaces together. These are extremely pleasant for residents to make use of in their leisure time. However, they are not always visible on mapping platforms such as Google Maps. We would like to encourage their use to promote health and wellbeing in the constituency, so will the Minister tell me what discussions he has had with those technology platforms to make those paths more accessible to local residents?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and share her delight in these informal paths, of which we have an enormous number in Herefordshire, as she might imagine. Local authorities are best placed, in the first instance, to use their knowledge and understanding of local networks, as are tourism agencies and local

map providers. From my point of view, there have not yet been any discussions with the electronic mapping services, but I very much take my hon. Friend's point and I have already made plans to meet some of them in order to take forward this agenda.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will know that many cyclists are killed and injured on the roads every year. Just on the edge of my constituency, one person was killed and two were injured this week. We need to look at improving cycling, and we must have discussions with the Health Department. What discussions has the Minister had with the Health Department to ensure that people get more exercise but are also kept safe on the roads?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely recognise the problem that the hon. Gentleman raises. I have not yet personally had any discussions of that kind, but the Government are making significant investments in improving safety for cyclists. That includes training and improved cycling facilities such as cycle lanes. That will continue to be part of our programme over the next few years.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Can the Minister assure me that he is having regular discussions with the Department for Communities and Local Government about promoting cycling and walking networks in new developments? We have a massive opportunity in Taunton Deane now that we have garden town status. In particular, I know that constituents would love to link up Bishop's Lydeard, Cottford St Luke and Norton Fitzwarren with a cycleway. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss providing help with some pots of money to unlock that?

Mr Speaker: Possibly even on the prospective cycleway.

Jesse Norman: As a keen cyclist, I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and discussing that matter. There are plenty of existing pots of money that are potentially available for applications, and we as a Department work closely with the DCLG, notably on the local growth fund.

Rail Electrification: South Wales

5. Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to electrify the rail network to Swansea and further west. [900455]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her election to this House. Electrification work is continuing on the Great Western main line, but the good news for her constituents and others in south Wales is that the new generation of electric trains will arrive in Cardiff and Swansea this autumn, providing more seats and better journey experiences. That is good news for rail users in south Wales and the west country.

Tonia Antoniazzi: It has been reported that the Secretary of State is preparing to announce yet further delays to the Great Western main line electrification programme, and my constituents in Gower are fed up with the contempt that the Government continue to show them on investment. The Secretary of State has said that the

programme will happen, but will he promise that it will not be delayed any further? We need to make Swansea the gateway to west Wales.

Chris Grayling: I appreciate the importance of transport to Swansea, and that is precisely why I am doing what the hon. Lady's constituents will want, which is to deliver them a better journey experience not in several years' time but this autumn. They will have a new generation of trains that will provide much better journeys to London, which is exactly the kind of service they want. When the first new train comes to Swansea, I hope that she will be there to see it and will realise what a difference it will make to her constituents' rail journeys in south Wales and elsewhere.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on moving ahead with the electrification of the rail line into south Wales and through Swansea. I remind him that the electrification of the railway as far as Swansea was announced by a Conservative Secretary of State, and that the Labour Government did not electrify a single inch of the rail lines in Wales to improve the Welsh economy.

Chris Grayling: If I remember rightly, the Labour Government electrified only 10 miles in 13 years. My right hon. Friend will understand that we have to ensure first and foremost that we are delivering better journeys for passengers, and I am pleased that this autumn's changes and the new trains arriving in Swansea and other parts of south Wales will lead to an immediate improvement in passengers' journeys. That is what they really want.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): In order to make the most of the benefits of electrification in south Wales, we need new stations to take advantage of capacity on the line. The proposals for St Mellon's parkway in the east of Cardiff are good, and they are backed by the private sector, the Welsh Government and Cardiff Council and have cross-party support. When can we expect a decision about money from the new stations fund?

Chris Grayling: I also think that that is an interesting proposal, and it does not actually need quite the same mechanism of approval as a station built with public funding. I am happy to see the project go ahead. The real issue is ensuring that it can work with the timetables, so that trains can stop and the service can work. As a private sector-funded project, if it is practical, I can see no reason why any of us would do anything other than support it.

Transport Infrastructure Investment

6. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to balance the distribution of transport infrastructure investment between London and other regions. [900456]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is always a delight to perform under your benevolent gaze, Mr Speaker. The industrial strategy Green Paper set out the Government's commitment to take account of the balance of spending per head on

infrastructure between different regions. The hon. Lady will be familiar with the transport investment strategy—published just last week—which sets out the Government's priorities for transport investment, supporting growth right across the country. I assure her that how projects contribute to creating a more balanced economy will in future be weighed, measured and valued in a way that it has never been before.

Diana Johnson: But we know that London gets 10 times the investment that Yorkshire and the Humber does. While Crossrail 2 has already been earmarked for £27 billion, the rail electrification to Hull has been scrapped by Transport Ministers, the A63 upgrade has been delayed, and the Hull chamber of commerce is concerned about the downgrading of TransPennine services. In Hull, we pay our taxes and we pay higher fares, so when are we going to get a fair deal on transport investment?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is being untypically churlish—*[Interruption.]* No, untypically churlish. The Government have committed to build the infrastructure to support regional growth. She knows that that is why we are increasing Government infrastructure investment by 50% over the next four years, supporting growth and jobs right across the country. That includes the £15 billion we committed to the first road investment strategy, which she will know involves schemes right across the country—south, east, west and north. But let me find common ground with her; she is right that her part of the country deserves its place in the sun, which is why we must rebalance our investment to reflect local needs such as hers.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Bradford is one of the biggest cities in the country and, in the last Parliament, the Government were very supportive of it being a stop on Northern Powerhouse Rail. Is it the Government's position that they will make sure that the investment is provided to ensure that Bradford is a stop on Northern Powerhouse Rail?

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend has made that point previously to champion the cause and interests of people in Bradford. We are waiting for proposals from Transport for the North. I have no doubt that he will lobby for and so contribute to those proposals, and that he will make his case to Transport for the North. We will consider the proposals when we get them, but I fully understand the strength of his argument.

22. [900475] **Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): While I do not dispute the need for investment in transport infrastructure across the country, the fact remains that promised investment in London, such as for additional carriages on Southeastern services, has yet to materialise. The rail Minister, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), said on 30 March that it will be happening “very soon”. Can we have an update?

Mr Hayes: The rail Minister has made it a priority, and when he makes things a priority, they get done.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister spoke about places in the sun a minute ago, and I am sure he was thinking of Cleethorpes. As he knows from his recent visit to my constituency, one of the urgent

priorities is the resurfacing of the A180 to remove the concrete surfaces. Does the Department have any plans that will help that project? As he was unable to answer Question 3, perhaps he could develop the role of apprentices in major schemes.

Mr Hayes: I am always willing to do that, as you know, Mr Speaker.

I was pleased to visit the Cleethorpes constituency to unveil the new road we built as part of our road investment strategy. My hon. Friend is right, however, that there is a challenge associated with the nearby road surface. I considered that at the time, and the Secretary of State has asked us to look at these things in greater detail. I can assure my hon. Friend that ensuring roads are fit for purpose, as well as investing in new roads, is at the heart of all we do.

Mr Speaker: We are very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, I am sure.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The east coast main line between London and the north is in urgent need of infrastructure investment to end the disruption caused by failures of the antique overhead power lines. How much does the Minister expect Virgin Trains East Coast to contribute to that?

Mr Hayes: The east coast main line is the line I use regularly, and I am extremely familiar with the quality of that service. The hon. Lady will know that the new express trains we will be using on that main line by the end of 2018 will offer greater capacity, reduced journey times and more reliable services.

Rachael Maskell: So not only does the Minister not answer my question but he does not know the amount the operator has to contribute, yet he is about to dig into the back pockets of taxpayers to bail out the Stagecoach-Virgin consortium when, just two years ago, the Government took East Coast out of public ownership after returning £1 billion—£1 billion!—to the Treasury. How much will the Virgin Trains East Coast contract retrofit cost the taxpayer? Does he not draw the same conclusion as the Labour party that, as we pay for private and make savings from public rail, only a publicly owned rail franchise can operate in the public interest?

Mr Hayes: My goodness, Mr Speaker. This is like a journey to a past that never happened. I remember one of British Rail's last, and perhaps most poignant, slogans: "We're getting there". Well, getting there is a pretty fundamental requirement of any journey. Could there be a less ambitious objective than merely getting there? That is what nationalised railways were like—we all remember them. They were a disaster. The cost of renationalising the railways in the way the hon. Lady recommends would be at least £19 billion, which is £19 billion that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) and others want to spend on all these other schemes.

Mr Speaker: Our only surprise is that neither Yeats nor Samuel Taylor Coleridge featured in the answer provided by the right hon. Gentleman.

Roads: Mid Sussex

7. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What plans he has to improve the road network in Mid Sussex constituency. [900457]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I will also attempt to keep Keats and Coleridge out of this answer.

Mid Sussex will benefit from the investment of over £100 million on local road maintenance and small-scale transport schemes in West Sussex County Council up to 2021. In addition, the county benefits from access to £304 million-worth of local growth funding over the same period which has been secured by the Coast to Capital local enterprise partnership.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Mid Sussex is greatly looking forward to the Secretary of State's visit in early September to see the serious problems we have on the roads. Does the Minister agree that it is cardinally bad, rotten government to go on pushing housing into constituencies such as mine without investing in the infrastructure there in the first place? It is not a matter for West Sussex County Council; it is a matter for Mid Sussex District Council, which cannot go on accepting this volume of house building without a significant investment in dealing with these major bottlenecks on the roads.

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend has made his point eloquently. All I would say is that the major roads network that we announced last week, along with the bypass fund, is specifically designed to be part of a wider strategy whose purpose is to provide the infrastructure that new housing development requires. That should be part of the solution for any of these schemes.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This question has been narrowly confined to Mid Sussex, from which the right hon. Gentleman's Warley constituency is a considerable distance away. If he is going to focus his question exclusively on Mid Sussex, not "and elsewhere" or "and other places", we will hear him.

John Spellar: Will the Minister accept that the improvements to the road system to East Sussex—

Sir Nicholas Soames: Mid Sussex.

John Spellar: Mid Sussex. Does the Minister accept that the road system to Mid Sussex would be considerably improved if money was diverted from the ever-deepening, bottomless pit of HS2, thus enabling those projects to move forward much more quickly? May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) in calling for a reassessment of this increasingly troubled scheme?

Jesse Norman: Mr Speaker, it is a mark of your grace that you were able to allow the right hon. Gentleman to proceed with a question so evidently unrelated to the issue, so much so that he was not able to make it to the actual name of the constituency or the area concerned, although that came in the first 10 seconds of his question.

The answer to his question, if I may dignify it with an answer, is that there will be plenty of investment in both sides of that equation.

Mr Speaker: Certainly I was generous, but generosity is my middle name.

Ticketing Information

8. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve ticketing information for rail passengers. [900458]

14. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to simplify ticketing information for rail passengers. [900464]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Passengers are frustrated by the lack of information they get when choosing their ticket. The problems can be deep-rooted, but when I started as rail Minister I wanted to make rapid progress. I have been working with industry, the regulator and consumer groups, having launched an action plan on fares and ticketing. We are getting on with the job of delivering the many, many proposals contained therein.

Damien Moore: Does the Minister agree that if rail franchises do not adopt a more transparent ticket price system voluntarily, the Government should step in to ensure that rail passengers are offered the best value for money?

Paul Maynard: We certainly recognise that fares revenue is crucial to funding the day-to-day operation of the railway. I agree that all franchises should listen to passengers, and ensure that their fare structures are both fair and logical, as well as keenly priced, to support the many passengers who rely upon them.

James Duddridge: Southend has two train lines and multiple stations within the Southend boundary. Would it not be simpler if the same ticket could be used on both lines, which would be good for residents and visitors alike? It would clear things up for visitors, allowing them to do journeys into Southend and then pop in somewhere else on the way back to London.

Paul Maynard: I agree that Southend's beauties merit a journey by all passengers, wherever possible. We are seeing rapid technological change on the railway. The growth in smart ticketing and the various ticket media within a relatively short period will enhance the possibility for passengers to experience the flexibility to which my hon. Friend refers. I am looking forward to working with the industry on driving that technological change to make that vision a reality.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Transport Committee, Lilian Greenwood.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The ticketing information in which passengers are most interested is the price. Since 2014, commuter rail fare increases have been capped to the retail prices index, but in an answer to me yesterday, the rail Minister said that that fares policy is "under review". Next month's

inflation figures will determine the cap for January 2018. If the Department reverts to the old formula, fares could rise by 5% or more, pricing many off the railways. Next week, when the Secretary of State announces his investment plans for control period 6, will he pledge that the improvements that passengers need will come at a price they can afford?

Paul Maynard: I suppose that I should start by welcoming the hon. Lady to her new position, although she has started to prognosticate already about what may or may not occur in the future. We have no intention of seeking to raise fares in the way that she describes, and it is not an appropriate path to go down. We always seek to put passengers first. We are continuing to maintain the cap at the moment, but we keep policies under review at all times. She should not read more into that than is actually there.

Kettering Rail Bridge

9. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will ensure that work to strengthen the Kettering rail bridge (a) starts and (b) is completed to schedule. [900459]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Network Rail has announced that the A6013 Northampton Road, from Northfield Avenue mini roundabout to Lake Avenue, will be closed between 24 July 2017 and 4 Sep 2017. Network Rail is confident that the work will begin and finish as scheduled, and we are in regular contact with Network Rail in regard to this work.

Mr Hollobone: The Northampton Road railway bridge is located right next to the busiest road junction in Kettering town centre. The junction will be closed for six weeks and will cause major disruption to the town. The frustration of local residents will at least be partly assuaged if the Minister could reassure all of us who live in Kettering that he is at least actively considering proposals to reinstate the half-hourly mainline train service north from Kettering, which will go over the repaired bridge in the new franchise.

Paul Maynard: I recognise why my hon. Friend's constituents would have concerns, having seen a similar closure in my own constituency and the issues and problems that that has caused. I have also heard his observations and views on the extra services that he wishes to see from Kettering. We will shortly be launching a consultation on the new east midlands franchise and I am sure that his request will figure prominently in our thinking on what we do next on that franchise.

Liquefied Natural Gas

10. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to promote the use of liquefied natural gas as an alternative to diesel fuel. [900460]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The low carbon truck trial, which ran to 2016, provided over £11 million to support industry-led trials of alternative fuels in the road freight sector, the majority of which involved liquefied natural gas.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Statebourne Cryogenics, based in my constituency, produces a world-first portable LNG refuelling station, which eliminates the release of methane into the atmosphere with significant cost reductions to the process. This is seen as an alternative to diesel for large HGVs, especially in the light of discussions around diesel pollution. Will the Minister commit to meeting me, Statebourne Cryogenics, and other partners in this project such as BOC and Calor Gas to discuss this matter further?

Mr Hayes: Well, the short answer is yes, but I do not want to give a short answer. Let me say this: the hon. Lady's constituency is a beacon for low emission vehicles of all kinds. I have visited the Nissan plant in her constituency, which builds the Nissan Leaf, but I feel that my visits to her constituency have been too few, so I will meet not only her, but representatives of the businesses that she describes to find out what more we can do.

Mr Speaker: It is obvious that the hon. Lady is in a state of quite overwhelming excitement at the prospect, as I am sure will be the people of her constituency—particularly those of them who know the right hon. Gentleman—when they realise that they are to be privileged with such a visit.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Especially if there is an unveiling to go with it.

Towed Trailers

12. **Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve the safety of towed trailers on roads. [900462]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I salute the hon. Lady for the work that she has done to raise the issue of towed trailer safety with my predecessor following the tragic death of Freddie Hussey. I very much look forward to meeting her to discuss this matter further on 19 July. As she will know, in November 2016, the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency led a campaign about safety checks when towing trailers with the #TowSafe4Freddie. DVSA and stakeholders plan to relaunch the campaign this summer. The Government have also consulted about the law relating to causing death by careless and dangerous driving. I look forward to discussing all those issues when I meet her.

Karin Smyth: I welcome the Minister's comments and look forward to our meeting. I am grateful for the work of his predecessor, as are my constituents Scott and Donna Hussey, whose three-year-old son, Freddie, was killed by a loose trailer in 2014. Will the Minister offer his support to a new road safety initiative from the National Trailer and Towing Association that will see member organisations across the country offer free towing safety checks to members of the public?

Jesse Norman: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Lady has mentioned this important initiative in the House and that the National Trailer and Towing Association has established the scheme. People can go to one of their participating service centres and get a

visual inspection or report on their trailers. This should make a difference in helping trailer owners to identify any defects and have them rectified. Not only do I welcome the initiative, but I welcome the fact that the association and other organisations are working closely with Government to improve the safety of towed vehicles.

Railways: Cheshire

13. **Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con):** Whether he plans to expand the rail network in Cheshire. [900463]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): We are investing more than £1 billion in the great north rail project to transform rail travel for passengers across the north of England. In addition, we are supporting local enterprise partnerships and Transport for the North in progressing their priorities for investment in new stations and upgraded infrastructure.

Ms McVey: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply, and I want to impress on him the urgency of getting the mid-Cheshire rail link and the Manchester airport western link. Our population is expanding, businesses are increasing in size and the local plans will mean tens of thousands of new homes in the area. This cannot be catered for on the local roads and High Speed 2 will not be an answer. Will the Minister commit to support these schemes and come to meet me and the Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association?

Paul Maynard: First, let me welcome my right hon. Friend back to her place in this House. It is good to see her here again. As a regular commuter to school on the mid-Cheshire rail line, from Cuddington to Hale, I am all too aware of the attractions of reopening the line to Middlewich. I am more than happy to meet her and local campaigners, and it is really important that all local transport authorities and local enterprise partnerships are supportive of such projects. I am sure that in her early days as the Member for Tatton she will work with those groups to make this a reality.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Mersey-Dee Alliance, which includes the Cheshire West and Chester local authority, has a growth deal bid that includes rail improvements and the Chancellor indicated in his Budget that that might get some support. Can the Minister say whether any money has been given to the Department for Transport, in particular to improve the links between Crewe and Chester and on to north Wales?

Paul Maynard: We certainly recognise that our decision to take HS2 to Crewe by 2027 opened up a range of possibilities for improving connectivity into north Wales, considering the potential outcomes that passengers might want in terms of improved capacity, improved service frequency and so on. We are looking forward to doing more work on the Crewe hub and seeing what potential is unlocked by development at Crewe. Hopefully that will benefit not just Cheshire but north Wales.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): One pound is spent per person on transport infrastructure in Cheshire and the north-west for every £7 spent per person in London and the south-east. Can we have our extra £6 per person, please, to spend on things such as rail and road links to the port of Liverpool, which will help jobs and growth across the north-west?

Paul Maynard: We are always looking to ensure that we balance our investment across the country over time. I know that during my time on the Select Committee on Transport we looked very carefully at the relevant regional transport spending figures and what they do and do not tell us. We could have a very lengthy answer to this question, but that would displease you, Mr Speaker, so I point out once again the £1 billion investment across the north to improve rail infrastructure, including in the hon. Gentleman's area.

A27 Upgrade: Lancing to Worthing

15. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): When he plans to publish his proposals for the upgrade of the Lancing to Worthing section of the A27. [900466]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): Departmental officials are in discussion with Nexus and the Tyne and Wear Metro regarding their proposals for new rolling stock.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman who asked the question is a dedicated Member, but he represents a constituency in Sussex.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman) rose—

Mr Speaker: Well done. I call Minister Jesse Norman.

Jesse Norman: We got there, Mr Speaker. The £15 billion road investment strategy, published in December 2014, announced a scheme to improve the Lancing to Worthing section of the A27. Highways England has developed proposals and a public consultation will run from 19 July to 12 September 2017. From 19 July, Highways England's website for the scheme will have key information about the proposals, including the brochure, online questionnaire, frequently asked questions, background reports and supporting information.

Tim Loughton: I am sorry to see that the Minister took the wrong turning, and I am pleased to see that, since I posed the question, we now have a timetable. The Minister knows how vital upgrading the A27 is to the whole of West Sussex, but there are serious concerns that the £80 million allocated to the Worthing-Lancing section—Worthing being a town of 100,000 people—will be inadequate compared with the £250 million to bypass Arundel, which has just 5,000 people. If the consultation shows that this is not satisfactory, will he, in order to come up with some really meaningful solutions, seriously consider looking at the more expensive options?

Jesse Norman: I am sure that my hon. Friend understands that we recognise the A27 as a strategically important corridor across the south coast, and we will look very closely at any further proposals that he wishes to make.

Topical Questions

T1. [900476] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): Número uno, Señor Presidente: if he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just because the King of Spain visited yesterday and the hon. Gentleman felt it necessary to show off his language skills on that occasion, there was no need for him to do so again, but he obviously felt the need, and we have all seen what an edifying spectacle it was.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): All three of us have taken part in business questions, so I am sure that you were not totally surprised by that contribution, Mr Speaker.

On a serious note, I pay great tribute to the officers of the British Transport police and the staff of Northern Rail for the way in which they responded to the bomb attack in Manchester. The rail staff in particular, whose job description that was in no way part of, responded heroically, and they deserve our thanks.

Chris Bryant: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thought you might have picked something up from the Queen of Spain yesterday—[*Interruption.*] Some Spanish. I wholly concur with what the Secretary of State said about the staff in Manchester.

When the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness is upon us, may I urge the Secretary of State to come to the Rhondda to visit the Rhondda tunnel between Blaencwm and Blaengwynfi? That would be a magnificent tunnel if it were open for the public and cyclists to go through. It would be a great tourist attraction if only his Department would hand the project over to the local charity, and give it £250,000 as well.

Chris Grayling: I know that relations between the hon. Gentleman and the Labour party in south Wales can sometimes be slightly strained, but I am sure that he will use his influence on the Welsh Government, to whom we have offered to give the tunnel. They have not responded—I am waiting for their response—but it is there for them. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could encourage them to give us a response.

T3. [900478] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): May I ask the Secretary of State to sit down with the West Yorkshire combined authority to ensure that the Shipley eastern bypass, which is badly needed by my constituents and the local economy, is actually delivered, and that neither can blame the other for a lack of progress on it?

Chris Grayling: I regularly meet the combined authority, so I will happily discuss that issue with it. The creation of the major roads network and its bypass fund will, I hope, mean that in future we can unlock some of these schemes that will make such a difference to towns like Shipley around the country.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Two weeks ago today, the High Court gave the Secretary of State 14 days to make a decision over Southern rail's claims that its appalling service was not its fault, but was all down to industrial action. With the record fine that has been imposed today, such nonsense has been totally blown out of the water. After months and months of the Secretary of State and his Ministers coming to the Dispatch Box and blaming the unions, they have had to come clean and accept that Southern rail is simply not

fit for purpose. Does the Secretary of State now accept that continuing to tolerate such ineptitude—expecting a rail service to rely on workers' overtime, and compromising safety and accessibility—simply will not wash any longer, and that he has to call time on Govia Thameslink Railway?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman clearly still has not read the judgment from two weeks ago in this case—a case that we actually won. Let us be clear about what is being done today. For months I have said that the problems on this railway are not purely down to industrial action; there are other reasons. I am very clear, and so is Chris Gibb's report, that the prime responsibility for the trouble on that network in the past few months lies with trade unions fighting the battles of 30 years ago, and still they get support from the Labour party. The reality is that the Labour party and the unions are colluding to bring trouble to passengers, and it should stop.

Andy McDonald rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed, may I say to the hon. Gentleman that his second question must be shorter? The right of Front Benchers to come in on topical questions is not sacrosanct. I have to cater to Back-Bench Members, and if Front Benchers take too long, I might reconsider the entitlement of Front Benchers to come in, trespassing on Back-Bench time. Please, a sentence. Be brief.

Andy McDonald: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We are missing appendix 9 from the Gibb report. Can we see it, and will the Secretary of State tell us which claims he accepts and which he rejects?

Chris Grayling: Today's penalty has been for partial non-performance of contracts. The House and the country would expect me to impose penalties where they are needed and I have not sought to do anything otherwise. The reality is that, this afternoon, we expect the result of a ballot for yet further strike action for a 23.8% pay rise and a deal that has already been accepted by the ASLEF union on the same routes for the same company. This politically motivated set of threats of action should stop, and the Labour party should stop supporting it.

T5. [900480] **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): For the first time in 45 years, there is a commercial rail service between Swanage and Wareham in my constituency, thanks to the dedication and hard work of the volunteers and members of Swanage Railway. What assurances can the rail Minister give that he will support our rail heritage and ensure that this trial becomes a permanent success?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I am pleased to hear what is happening on Swanage Railway. I have met the all-party group on heritage rail, and it is always good to hear examples of where heritage rail can work with main line operators, although I agree that that has to be done safely. We are looking to build on more franchise agreements when there are sensible schemes that we can support.

T2. [900477] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Last year, Nexus published its ambitious plans to expand the Tyne and Wear Metro, which included a welcome reference to extending the metro to Washington in my constituency. Will the Minister assure me and my constituents that the Government will act to upgrade this crumbling 37-year-old network, and to ensure that the proposed extensions, such as that to Washington, go ahead?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The hon. Lady knows that the Government invest a great deal in the metro, and it is right that we should. Part of that is about improving the existing stations, ticketing and rolling stock. I understand her point about the extension of the metro. Perhaps she can articulate that, among the other things that we shall doubtless discuss, when I visit her constituency.

T6. [900481] **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Queuing traffic and air pollution are the public health concerns for those living and working in my constituency. The local economy continues to grow and thrive under this Government, but air pollution affects the maritime industry, especially at Hamble Lane, where queueing is a real problem. Will the Minister outline the commitment to fund bypasses in my constituency in order to tackle air pollution?

Mr Hayes: Was it not Hegel, Mr Speaker, who said that nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without passion? My hon. Friend is certainly a passionate advocate for this scheme, which is important to her constituents. It is also important to the port, which she champions as well. We will look at these matters closely because port connectivity is vital if we are to make our maritime future as glorious as our maritime past.

T4. [900479] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the Minister say whether the new rolling stock for Merseytravel, HS2 and Crossrail will be procured using private or public finance, and why that is the case?

Chris Grayling: There has been a long tradition, under Governments of both parties, of a railway where we lease trains from the private sector. There have equally been occasions, as in the procurement of railway carriages for the east coast main line and the great western main line, when the Government have stepped in and taken that decision. We will have to look at which packages are available for those individual schemes. In the case of Merseytravel, the hon. Lady will have to talk to the Labour-controlled Merseyside councils.

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the new Chair of the Select Committee on Education to drop in on us; we are obliged to him.

T7. [900482] **James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): With Southend airport booming, there are great opportunities for associated business parks and businesses around that expanding airport. Will the Secretary of State agree to look at how we can expand business around successful regional airports?

Chris Grayling: It is really important that we make sure that our regional airports are successful. My hon. Friend and I visited Southend airport a few years ago. I was very impressed by what it has achieved and the way

in which it can be a driver of growth in the surrounding area. That applies across the whole country. It is one reason why the expansion of Heathrow is so important for regional airports further afield, and it is also why I hope that we will work together in a smart way to ensure that airports such as Southend flourish.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We have had many flowery words from the Government about understanding the experience of our constituents in the north-east who are forced to use crumbling rolling stock on Tyne and Wear Metro, but flowery words will not get our constituents to work on time unless they are matched by investment. Will the Minister now commit to investing in our rolling stock from the public purse?

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Lady should know that investment is central to what we want to achieve. We are investing £370 million through an 11-year asset renewal programme. We are undertaking a major programme of track and infrastructure renewals. We are refurbishing most of the 90 vehicles, modernising 45 stations and introducing new smart ticketing. What is not to like about that?

T8. [900483] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Chelmsford is one of the busiest commuter stations in the country, but Chelmsford commuters have experienced frequent and significant delays. Will the Minister please provide an update on what actions are being taken to counter these delays?

Paul Maynard: I am sorry to hear of the delays that are being experienced by my hon. Friend's constituents. Clearly we have had a period of very hot weather, which does impact on rail reliability, and speed restrictions do help to protect overhead line equipment. I met the industry forums just this week to discuss what lessons can be learned about repeated periods of hot weather and how we can best protect critical infrastructure, and I hope the decisions they now move on to take can start to improve reliability.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): When the Chancellor came to Bristol in May, he refused to confirm whether electrification of the Great Western line into the city centre would go ahead. Will the Transport Secretary confirm whether it has been deferred, as we were told last year, or has it really been ditched?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, we are focused on delivering service improvements right now. The electrification process is continuing—there is no secret about the fact that this project has not gone as well as expected—but the key thing for the hon. Lady's constituents is that, from this autumn, there will be brand-new trains, more capacity, a better service and six trains an hour from Bristol to London. This is really good news for her constituents.

T9. [900484] **Ms Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): A number of my constituents are deeply concerned about the impact of High Speed 2—particularly residents in Ashley, who came to see me in a surgery last week. I am

sure that you, Mr Speaker, will be pleased that I am not going to go through every point they raised with me, but could the Minister meet me to go through every concern they had?

Paul Maynard: At the same time as we meet to discuss the mid-Cheshire line, I will be more than happy also to discuss some of the issues with the HS2 phase 2b route, which goes through my right hon. Friend's constituency.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): When the Conservative manifesto was published, there was no mention of Crossrail 2. Will the Minister tell us whether that was by accident or design? When does he plan to make a decision on the business case?

Chris Grayling: First, I absolutely support the need for the capacity improvements that Crossrail 2 will bring to London—indeed, not just to London, but to areas outside. We are working our way through the business case. I do not think it is any secret that the Transport for London funding package has not quite lived up to initial promises, but I want this to work. I am seeing the Mayor next week, and we will do everything we can to make it work.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Belper, in my constituency, which is part of the world heritage site, is a great place to live, apart from the traffic? The A6 is far too clogged. Could we look at a bypass for Belper and at a new cycleway right up the Derwent valley?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Not only can we look at it, but we would be delighted to receive an application for a bypass. I look forward very much to cycling that section of the Derwent valley when I come to visit it on a future occasion.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The Transport Secretary is due to outline his plans for rail investment in the coming days. There is real concern that the promised electrification of the midland main line, which has the best business case, will be delayed again or dropped completely. Keeping promises is important. Will Ministers be keeping theirs?

Chris Grayling: The promise I will be keeping is on the services that people want. We will be delivering, by around 2020, the faster journey times to Sheffield and the capacity improvements that are needed to make this route fit for purpose for the next century.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Michelle and Mark Williams, who run the C&C taxi firm in St Austell? They have recently replaced all 14 of their diesel vehicles with electric vehicles. Theirs has been hailed as the greenest taxi firm in the country. Does he agree that more taxi firms should follow their example?

Mr John Hayes: Indeed. I have visited the new factory in Coventry that is building electric London cabs and the future is certainly for low-emission vehicles. That applies to vehicles that we might own, as well as to private hire vehicles and taxis. I certainly support what my hon. Friend suggests.

Business of the House

10.30 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 17 JULY—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to international immunities and privileges, followed by general debate on the abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public during the general election campaign.

TUESDAY 18 JULY—General debate on drugs policy.

WEDNESDAY 19 JULY—General debate on exiting the European Union and sanctions.

THURSDAY 20 JULY—Motion relating to the appointment of a new Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, followed by general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

FRIDAY 21 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to be aware that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise at the close of business on Tuesday 7 November and return on Monday 13 November; and for the Christmas recess, the House will rise at the end of business on Thursday 21 December and return on Monday 8 January 2018.

Finally, colleagues will also be pleased to know that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will be presented to the House today. As the Brexit Secretary has said, this is one of the most significant pieces of legislation that has ever passed through Parliament, and it is a major milestone in the process of our withdrawal. It means we will be able to exit the European Union with maximum certainty, continuity and control. That is what the British people voted for, and it is exactly what we will do.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the—oh, do I call it business? I am not quite sure. Quite frankly, I and other Opposition Members are appalled, saddened and bewildered in equal measure. We have asked the good citizens of this country to vote for us, and they have. As we are in a parliamentary democracy, they have given their consent to be governed, to enable MPs to form a Government, pass legislation, and hold Ministers to account. We have not been allowed to do that. This is not the end of term where we have no lessons and a light timetable, or where we are spending our time singing or whistling; it is a time of critical importance to this country, and the clock is ticking. We have been back for 31 days and in that time we have had only seven votes. Calling it a “zombie Parliament” makes it sound amusing, but this is serious. It is a threat to our parliamentary democracy.

Why does it take a Standing Order No. 24 application, as we had on contaminated blood, before a debate is scheduled, and then a concession by the Government, immediately before the debate, on an inquiry? Statutory instruments on tuition fees and personal independence

payments were prayed against, and no debate was granted. Again last week, I raised the statutory instrument that enacts a 6.1% interest rate on university student loans, and asked for a debate. The Leader of the House said to one of her hon. Friends that

“the mood of many colleagues has been heard, and I am quite sure that the Department for Education is considering this matter.”—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1346.]

Will she confirm when and how the Government will be considering the matter, and make a statement on these regulations, or at least give us time to debate it so that the Minister can come and explain why the most punitive interest rate is being applied to students?

To make matters worse, last week the same debate was scheduled on the Gibb report on two successive days until that was pointed out to the Government. This week, we also see two debates on the same subject—one in Westminster Hall yesterday, and then another on Monday, on the abuse and intimidation of candidates. While this is an important topic in the week that Viscount St Davids will be sentenced—we will hear today—on his abuse of Gina Miller, will the same debate be going ahead, or is it a mistake? Could we have an Opposition day on Monday instead?

The Leader of the House gave me no answer about whether there will be a summer Finance Bill. I do not know whether the Finance Bill will be in the autumn and the Budget will then be in the spring. Who knows, but it sounds to me like chaos, so can we have an answer?

Why has the Leader of the House not responded to requests for an Opposition day? The last one was on 23 February, granted to the Democratic Unionist party, but the official Opposition have not been granted one since January—to be precise, 25 January. Why no Opposition day? Why not let us debate and vote on an issue that is relevant to our constituents, who only a month ago told us what they thought? I thought the Leader of the House believed in sovereignty—that is what she campaigned on. The Opposition do, so let Parliament be sovereign and let us have a debate on a votable motion.

The Leader of the House said in June that the elongated Session would provide space to consider

“a domestic agenda which aims to tackle the social injustices in our country.”

So why has she allocated private Members’ Bill days for only one year of a two-year Session—13 dates? When will she say when the Opposition days will be for the first year of the Session, and when will we have the dates for the second year of the Session? Will she tell us her definition of what a Session is? If it is two years, we are therefore entitled to double the number of Opposition days.

On Tuesday, following the Taylor review, the Prime Minister said:

“We may not agree on everything, but through debate and discussion—the hallmarks of our Parliamentary democracy—ideas can be clarified and improved and a better way forward found.”

The Opposition agree, so why does the Prime Minister say that we need debate while Government representatives do everything they can to stifle debate? Is she an outsourced

[*Valerie Vaz*]

Prime Minister, completely detached from what is going on here? She can be heard in No. 10 singing the song “Heartbreaker”:

“Why do you have to be a heartbreaker,
When I was bein’ what you want me to be?
Suddenly everything I ever wanted has passed me by”.

I should have sung it rather than spoken it.

Finally, will you and the Leader of the House join me, Mr Deputy Speaker, in wishing everyone in the Black country a very happy Black Country Day? It is part of a month-long festival in Dudley, Walsall, Sandwell and Wolverhampton, and I invite everyone to come to Walsall.

Andrea Leadsom: I can certainly agree with the hon. Lady that that would probably be a more fun place to be today.

The hon. Lady raises some important points about our parliamentary democracy, but I find it deeply disappointing that the Opposition are trying to make something of what is an absolutely normal situation following a general election, when the Government of the day take steps to put Select Committees back in place, for instance. As she admits herself, the sitting days for private Members’ Bills are already on the Order Paper, and we are making progress. I congratulate all the Select Committee Chairs on their appointment yesterday, and the individual parties now need to get on with electing their Select Committee members, which they are doing at pace. The chiefs of the Opposition parties have been talking about Opposition days, and I gather that there has been an offer of an Opposition day in the next short sitting.

We are absolutely getting on with the business at pace and in accordance with normal procedures. I am left to conclude that this is just game playing by the Opposition. On the anniversary of her leadership of this country, the Prime Minister asked—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Walsall South (*Valerie Vaz*) is clearly not listening; she has other things to talk about. The Prime Minister asked all Members to come together in the interests of our country and give their ideas, input and support as we seek to fulfil the democratic will of the people in this country to leave the EU. What did the Opposition do? They ridiculed that. They absolutely reject the concept of working together in the interests of our country. Well, 13 million people voted for them, and they should support those people in their wish to see this country’s democratic will fulfilled.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen my early-day motion 155, about the potential closure of London Road in Harlow?

[That this House expresses concern over the decision taken by Harlow District Council to close London Road to motorists, restrict traffic with a bus gate and split the community in two; notes the record number of 409 objections to the planning application and 2,000-plus residents who have joined a protest group; understands that this road has been used as a primary route for residents to access health, educational and leisure services for over 20 years; and calls on the Government to investigate the decision that the local authority has taken to close this vital

connection and encourage Essex County Council to reject this Traffic Regulation Order from the planning decision.]

The decision by Harlow Council will cause immense problems to Harlow residents and motorists. May we have a statement on unnecessary road closures, as Harlow Council seems to be ignoring the wishes of thousands of people who have voiced complaints and the record 409 objections to the planning application?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Chair of the Select Committee on Education. He will be as delighted as all Members should be that there are 1.8 million more children in good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010. That is something for his Committee to build on. He is exactly right to raise the frustrating issue for all our constituents of unnecessary road closures. I am sure that he will give it his full attention, as he does everything he turns his mind to.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I join her in warmly congratulating my fellow Select Committee Chairs on their election yesterday. It is a great exercise in the democracy of this House, and we should be very proud of the way the Select Committees work, but we now need to get those Committees up and working. We need to get the membership of the Committees elected and we have one week in which to do it. Mr Speaker generously offered to facilitate with any issue, any party or any perceived blockage where he or the Deputy Speakers could help out. Did she take advantage of that generous opportunity? If not, why not?

We have passed one full piece of legislation through all stages of Parliament and two pieces on Second Reading, but we still have no Standing Committees in place. Will the Leader of the House endeavour to get this fixed before the zombies leave the building?

We have also not had a single debate about the perverse deal with the DUP, which has completely altered the usual funding allocations to the nations of the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister may have shed a tear on election night, but the DUP are marching all the way to the bank, rubbing their hands with glee. They will be back, demanding another few hundred million pounds, like an extortionist knows when he has someone in a vice-like grip in those sensitive places.

Hurray, the great repeal Bill will be out today, a Bill to unite the country in an invitation to climb aboard the battered jalopy as it trundles over the cliff edge. Apparently, Labour will oppose the Bill by defiantly agreeing with the Tory hard Brexit that will take us out of the single market and end freedom of movement. What opposition has been offered by the Labour party? In the meantime, we will continue to look after vital Scottish interests and fight for a place in the single market.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the membership of Select Committees. We want to get on with it, and on this side of the House we are getting on with selecting members. I hope that the hon. Gentleman’s democratic elections will be as clear as our own. I can assure him that through the usual channels an enormous amount of work is also going on to establish Standing Committees. No one

wants that to happen more than we do on the Government Benches. However, his remark about “zombies” is very rude to his colleagues—a few of them are still here today, and I thank them for turning up.

The hon. Gentleman talks about this Government not being democratically elected, but I remind him that we got 56 more seats than the official Opposition, which means that, in a democratic place such as this, we have the duty as well as the right to form a Government. I hope that he and his colleagues appreciate that fact.

It is a great shame that the hon. Gentleman talks constantly about wanting to stay in the single market, which he knows for a fact means not leaving the EU. In other words, he, for his own ends and those of his Scottish nationalist colleagues, would seek to undermine the will of the United Kingdom. That is totally undemocratic. Government Members and, I hope, Opposition Members will fulfil the will of the people.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware of concerns regarding challenges to the democratic system of government in Hong Kong? Some elected representatives there are being prevented from taking their seats in the legislature, and a recent statement from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the Sino-British joint declaration as “a historical document”, which

“no longer has any practical significance”.

This month marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of Hong Kong as a special administrative region on the principle of “one country, two systems”, so will she consider a debate in Government time about this concerning issue?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The Minister for Asia and the Pacific met the Chinese ambassador on 5 July, when he stressed the UK’s strong commitment to the Sino-British joint declaration—a legally binding treaty, registered with the UN, which continues to be in force. As co-signatory to the joint declaration, the UK will continue to stress to the Chinese Government the need to implement faithfully the one country, two systems arrangement.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): We do not yet know the allocation that the Government have determined for the Backbench Business Committee in this Session. We hope that the 27 days allocated in a normal Session will be doubled to 54 in this two-year Session.

Will the Leader of the House try to facilitate deciding the membership of the Backbench Business Committee quicker than that of the other Select Committees? The Backbench Business Committee is not a normal Select Committee; it is here to determine the Chamber’s business.

Andrea Leadsom: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his reappointment as Chairman. He did a great job in the previous Parliament and I am sure he will do so again. I am also sure that he recognises that we have tried to bring forward some of the carry-over requests from the previous Parliament for debates. As with Opposition days, the allocation of Backbench Business days is set out in Standing Orders. However, it has been the custom in longer-than-usual Sessions to offer additional days and we fully intend to do the same. More will be said about that in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call “Our Man in Havana”—Alec Shelbrooke.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the previous Parliament, I introduced a private Member’s Bill to ban unpaid internships. The Matthew Taylor report outlined this week that they are indeed damaging to social mobility and an abuse of power by employers. May we have a debate in this Chamber on all aspects of the Matthew Taylor report? For all the crowing on the other side, no Opposition Member bothered to turn up to debate the private Member’s Bill.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has really pushed this issue and he is right to do so. It is of great interest to the House, even when Opposition Members do not bother to turn up to support a Bill on it. The Government’s position is clear: employing unpaid interns as workers to avoid paying the national minimum wage or the national living wage is illegal, exploitative and represents a real barrier to social mobility by squeezing out candidates from less wealthy backgrounds.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last week, I visited Shelley College, an outstanding-rated school in my constituency, where staff explained that the budget had already been cut to the bone. Every school in my constituency faces further cuts. May we have a debate on the Government’s worrying plan to cut funding for local schools?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have protected cash spending on schools and we have created many thousands of new school places to meet demand. There has been a great deal of investment in the fabric of buildings. We fully appreciate that schools are under pressure. The hon. Lady will also know that we have accepted the recommendation of the independent schools’ pay body and we will do everything we can to ensure that, as I said earlier, the number of children who are in good and outstanding schools—1.8 million more than in 2010—increases and that we do more than ever particularly to help disadvantaged pupils.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mike Penning.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It has been a long time since I asked a question on health from the Back Benches. I am sure that the Leader of the House knows that Hemel Hempstead is the largest town in Hertfordshire, but that in 2006—we know which Government were in power—the acute services at Hemel Hempstead Hospital were closed. We now have clinical commissioning groups, but they seem to be completely unaccountable. The CCG for our part of the world costs £10 million a year and it has just rubber-stamped more closures at Hemel Hempstead Hospital. May we have a debate on the power of CCGs and their accountability—or lack of it?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Many colleagues from all parties are concerned about what happens to hospitals in their

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areas. My right hon. Friend will know that there are clear rules about accountability and consultation with patients and that, of course, any decisions should be led by clinicians in consultation with users of the service. He makes an important point and he may well wish to raise it in Westminster Hall or in an Adjournment debate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Yesterday, during the debate on the tragic events at Grenfell Tower, the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), was asked whether local authorities—such as Coventry, for example—would be helped to introduce safety measures. He said that the Government would help with the process. In view of the number of cuts that the Government have inflicted on local authorities over the last seven years, may we have a statement to clarify what help local authorities will actually be given?

Andrea Leadsom: Grenfell Tower is one of the most appalling disasters that the country has ever faced. We will all continue to be absolutely focused and determined to get to the bottom of what caused it, and the top priority is to try to help the people who have suffered so terribly. At the same time—as the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government have made clear—we want to take steps to ensure that such a disaster cannot happen again, which will include requiring other local authorities to check what fire regulations and what sort of cladding their areas have and what other risks are being faced. The Government are giving as much support as possible to that process.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The public consultation on the future of the children’s congenital heart disease service at Royal Brompton Hospital will close on Monday. If the proposals from NHS England are implemented, all CHD services at the hospital will be closed, including the adult research centre, the children’s intensive care unit, and specialist children’s respiratory services for conditions such as cystic fibrosis, asthma and muscular dystrophy. Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to explain how those services will be provided for my constituents and others in the south-east and London if the proposals go ahead?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has raised a very important point, which I know is of huge interest throughout the House. No final decisions have been made, and there is no plan to close the Royal Brompton as a provider of CHD services. NHS England is currently conducting a review of congenital heart services across the country before finally deciding on and implementing any change. Let me make it clear that the review is not about cutting services or costs, but about ensuring that patients have the very highest standard of care now and in the future, regardless of where they live or which hospital provides that care.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Given the mess that the United Kingdom Government are making of the economy and Brexit, and given how

successful the Scottish Government have been with their recent economic measures, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on devolving further fiscal responsibilities to Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I think it behoves the hon. Lady to look very carefully at what the Scottish Government are doing now. Their track record of managing their current devolved powers leaves something to be desired.

The hon. Lady says that the UK Government are not doing well with EU withdrawal. I beg to differ from her completely. Today we are introducing the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which seeks to implement the will of the people. The Scottish National party clearly does not care about the will of the people. The Scottish people decided that they wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, but, rather than trying to get on with the day job, SNP Members focus entirely on who makes the decisions to which the hon. Lady has referred. That is not a democratic approach.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Alderley Park in my constituency is the largest bio-centre in the United Kingdom. It is a true world leader, and it is currently undergoing a 10-year transformation. Will the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy make a statement on the country’s industrial strategy and how Alderley Park fits into it? [*Interruption.*]

Andrea Leadsom: Is it not interesting that Opposition Members are just chuntering? That is because they are not interested in the strength of our economy.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on one of her first interventions since she retook her seat, and I welcome her back to this place. We should be talking about jobs, economic growth and areas in which the UK can lead the world. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be keen to talk about the Government’s industrial strategy. We are determined to ensure that it means that we have the high-skilled, highly paid jobs of the future, throughout the United Kingdom.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The previous chief executive at Hull Royal Infirmary left having put the hospital into a terrible state. He moved to another hospital, which subsequently moved into special measures. During that time, he was investigated by NHS Protect, the anti-fraud body of the NHS. I understand that he has now retired and set up a consultancy to offer his services to the NHS. Can we have a debate on the revolving door of failed NHS managers and their role in the NHS?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like an extremely concerning issue regarding one individual, and the bigger issue of the revolving door of people who have failed in one job and move on to another one, often at significant expense to the taxpayer. She will be aware that there have been a number of Public Accounts Committee reports on that issue, but she may want to raise it herself through a Westminster Hall debate.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware of the looming crisis involving the amount of plastic entering our seas and oceans. We are quickly getting to the point where there

will be more plastic than fish in the sea. In the light of that, I warmly welcomed the comment by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that the Government are now considering introducing a plastic bottle deposit return scheme, but can we have a statement from the Secretary of State, so we can discuss and indeed promote that scheme in the Chamber?

Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend will know, I am passionately concerned about that issue. I was delighted with the results of the consultation on the banning of microbeads in face wash and other products and with the results of our litter strategy, which looks at what else we can do to eradicate plastics from our oceans. Eighty per cent. of the plastics that end up in the ocean come from the land, and it is important that we deal with litter on the land as well. I am sure that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be keen to do just that, and that he will come to the House in due course when he has something clear to say.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Can we have an urgent debate on the role and remit of the Homes and Communities Agency? I have two businesses under threat of closure after the HCA triggered break clauses in their leases. The HCA has also damaged communities in east Durham, notably in Horden, through its failure to act after the Accent housing association disposed of its housing stock. Will the Government take control of that public body, which has delivered little benefit and caused no end of misery in areas such as east Durham?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, the hon. Gentleman raises what sounds like an important and serious issue. I am sure that he will want to raise it directly with the Secretary of State, or perhaps at oral questions, to ensure that a spotlight is shone on the issue.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, you look like a gentleman who enjoys a glass or two of English sparkling wine. [*Interruption.*] Forgive me. I invite you and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to tour the many vineyards in my constituency, including the Fox & Fox and the Bluebell vineyards—award-winning vineyards supporting jobs and the local economy. Can we have a debate on the best of British produce, including English sparkling wine, and how we can best promote it in new markets and harness the opportunity of Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: I can tell my hon. Friend that I have only ever seen Mr Deputy Speaker have a cup of tea and a Chorley cake. Isn't that right, Mr Deputy Speaker? She raises an important point. English sparkling wine is taking the world by storm. We are winning prizes and competing with famous brands. She is right to raise that valuable and growing sector and I would be delighted to take her up on her offer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I can assure you that Mrs Hoyle will be the one who will come.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Can the Leader of the House arrange an emergency debate on the re-routing of HS2 in South Yorkshire? At the HS2 briefing for Members last night, the chairman of HS2 said that the reason it is not in favour of the Sheffield

Meadowhall station is the lack of backing by Sheffield City Council and the Sheffield chamber of commerce, blatantly ignoring the wishes of the other three councils in South Yorkshire. Can we have an urgent debate on those matters?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman will know that there has been wide consultation on the routes for HS2, as I discovered during phase 1, which has now received Royal Assent, so there have been and will continue to be many opportunities for consultation. I urge him to take every opportunity to feed in to the process as early as he can.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on sharp practices by private car parking companies? Smart Parking has taken over the car park behind the Co-op in Saltaire and has changed the rules so that people have to get a ticket for the first 20 minutes of their stay even though it is free, when previously they did not, and with very minimal and inadequate signage, and it then introduced draconian fines of £100 for anybody who does not meet that new requirement. This is not only ripping off its customers and my constituents, but is having a terrible effect on local businesses in the area. May we have a debate so that we can stop some of these practices of rogue companies such as Smart Parking?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure all Members will share my hon. Friend's disgust at some of the activities of rogue and unfair private parking operators, and he will be pleased to know that the Government have taken steps to tackle this, including the banning of wheel-clamping and towing. Consumer protection regulations have also been amended to make it simpler and clearer for consumers to bring their own actions to seek compensation when they have been the victims of misleading or aggressive debt collection practices, but I do think this is an area that we will come back to.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Leader of the House says that the business she has announced for next week is business as normal, but it certainly is not. Normal business in this Parliament is when Select Committees are able to meet and are able to quiz Ministers, when every second sitting week includes an Opposition day debate on a votable motion, and when there is a Backbench Business debate every sitting week, but she is not allowing any of that. Will not voters start to conclude that this Government are absolutely terrified of the House? Since she has congratulated the new Select Committee Chairs, will she at least guarantee that they can actually chair a Committee because they will be able to sit by next Thursday?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is talking about what are routine measures after a general election to re-establish the Select Committees. If he looks back through history, he will see that we are moving exactly as quickly as any other new Government. We are trying to establish these Committees as quickly as we can. He says we are not discussing anything of any value; I think he must agree that we had the Grenfell Tower debate, and there is the issue of abuse and intimidation of parliamentary candidates, which is damaging—[*Interruption.*] He is not listening to the answer; he is not interested in the answer. [*Interruption.*] So, he is

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saying that discussing abuse and intimidation of candidates, which is clearly putting people off actually standing—[*Interruption.*] He will appreciate that not nearly enough time and effort has been given to what is a very significant matter. [*Interruption.*] He waves his hand; people have had death threats and people are being put off from standing for Parliament—[*Interruption.*] So he does not care about that. Next week on the Order Paper are very important—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I do not think that is the case; I think every Member cares about every other Member here—let us be clear about that.

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The Metropolitan police recently revealed that up to 50,000 crimes a year are now being committed by thieves on motorbikes and pedal cycles. That is reflected in correspondence I receive from my constituents across Hornchurch and Upminster. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on whether police have all the powers they need to tackle this alarming new crime wave?

Andrea Leadsom: May I start by welcoming my hon. Friend to her place? I can confirm that the Home Office is currently in discussion with the Metropolitan police about the problem of motorcycle and moped theft in London and will look very carefully at the evidence on what more can be done to prevent it. Of course, how the police enforce the law and deploy available resources is the responsibility of individual chief officers, taking into account specific local problems and the demands they are faced with.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): On Tuesday, the Foreign Secretary told this House that the UK Government will

“work closely under the Joint Ministerial Committee to bring in the devolved Administrations and make sure the great deal we are going to get has their endorsement and approval.”—[*Official Report*, 11 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 139.]

The truth is that the JMC plenary last met in January, the JMC Ministers last met in February and there was no JMC agreement on triggering article 50 before the Prime Minister triggered it. Indeed, since the election no meeting date has yet been set with the Welsh and Scottish Governments. May we have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the JMC and its role in the process of the UK exiting the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: As many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have made clear, it is fully the intention to consult widely on all matters regarding devolution, and those conversations have indeed taken place before. It has been made clear that no powers that currently reside in the devolved Administrations are to be withdrawn, and that there will be further opportunities for devolution. The hon. Gentleman is focusing on process, and I am trying to explain that we are absolutely attending to process but what is important is the intention of this Government, which is to consult widely and to seek the agreement of all colleagues across the House as we fulfil the will of the people of the United Kingdom.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Could my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the laws relating to the unauthorised arrival of travelling people in parks and open spaces? Only last week, a group of very hostile people arrived in a local park and caused much damage to play equipment, not to mention the cost to the council officers and police who had to remove them.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I am aware that this is a matter of interest to Members on both sides of the House who understand the frustration when Travellers arrive on unauthorised land and cause damage and upset to local communities. I can tell him that local authorities and the police have a wide range of strong powers that enable them to take action, and the Government really want to see them working together to address this issue.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Please allow me to refresh the Leader of the House’s memory. It was on 25 January this year that we last had an Opposition day debate. She referred earlier to Opposition Members needing to represent our constituents, and we wish to do so. Why will she not commit right now to granting Opposition day debates and to correctly doubling the number of Back-Bench business debates? Why not?

Andrea Leadsom: As I mentioned earlier, an Opposition day has been proposed for the next short session of Parliament, and that is going through the usual channels—[*Interruption.*] As a matter of convention, those things go through the usual channels. The Standing Orders set out the number of Opposition days and Back-Bench days. It is also the convention in a longer than usual Session to offer more such days, and it is our intention to do exactly that. It is absolutely the case that we will set up the Committees as soon as possible, as has happened before, and offer more Back-Bench and Opposition days than would normally be allocated through Standing Orders. I genuinely do not see why the Opposition are making such a big fuss about this. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): In the agreement made with the Democratic Unionist party, the Government generously and wisely offered a detailed study into the benefits of lower VAT for the tourism industry. May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the benefits of such a study elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and potentially in coastal communities such as the Isle of Wight, and more generally on measures to support coastal tourism in the UK? May I recommend the Isle of Wight, not least because it has the highest rates of sunshine in the United Kingdom? Half our GDP comes from tourism, and it is a self-contained area that would greatly benefit from such a study into lower VAT on tourism.

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. He will obviously be a strong advocate for the Isle of Wight, and I am sure that all hon. Members will be keen to go there just as soon as their summer recess plans permit. He has campaigned on the issue of tourism, which is vital for the economy of the Isle of Wight, and I completely understand his desire for more effort to be made for coastal communities. That is shared by this Government and he might wish to apply for an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate in which to put forward his suggestions.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): When can the House express its disdain and contempt for the rip-off decision made by a gullible Government in agreeing to buy the dearest electricity in the world from a French company and guaranteeing that price for 35 years? Only months after starting out, the project is £1.5 billion over budget and a year behind schedule. Like all other European pressurised reactors—EPRs—this one will involve vast cost overruns and long delays, and none of them has ever produced enough electricity to light a bicycle lamp. May we debate this, to address the continuing rip-off of the taxpayer for the next 50 years?

Andrea Leadsom: I have the greatest respect for the hon. Gentleman, who has been an anti-nuclear campaigner for a long time. I respectfully say, as an ex-Energy Minister, that I just disagree with him. On average, nuclear energy provides around 20% of our electricity needs at all times, and our ageing fleet of nuclear power stations must be replaced. If we want to continue to keep the lights on, we have to take steps. This particular project protects taxpayers from the costs of budget overruns.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As I understand it, the Government will deposit the High Speed 2 phase 2a Bill on Monday next week. According to parliamentary procedures, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and I understand them, that leaves only 56 days of consultation over the summer holidays and summer recess, which is simply not enough. Will my right hon. Friend consider extending the period for six weeks or delaying the deposit of the Bill until we return in September?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that consultation is important, and I will certainly take up this issue with the Secretary of State for Transport.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Leader of the House has been asked several times about having an Opposition day debate so that we can represent our constituents. I want to ask her a simple question to which she may answer yes or no: can we have an Opposition day debate next week?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that the business for next week has already been announced.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): The exploitation of leasehold agreements by house builders and management companies is a national scandal that is leaving homeowners in my constituency in financial difficulty. May we have an urgent debate to explore an industry-wide solution to address the actions of such companies across the board?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise that important issue. The Government are working with partners who have an interest in reforming residential leasehold, as outlined in our housing White Paper, to try to improve fairness and transparency for leaseholders. The White Paper responded to leaseholders' concerns that were raised by MPs in a debate on reforming leasehold in December 2016, and we will be consulting on what more needs to be done to promote greater transparency and fairness for leaseholders, including

whether all developers and managing agents are acting in the best interests of those thinking of buying and living in a leasehold property.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 25 July, we mark 18 years of brutality against Falun Gong practitioners in China. So many families have been destroyed and so many people have lost their lives for their faith in Falun Gong's guiding principles of truthfulness, compassion and tolerance. Despite all its resources and the inside knowledge, China has not provided any information to show that the forced organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience is not happening. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or, better still, a debate on this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a harrowing issue, which many hon. Members across the House will have been made aware of. It is certainly something that he should raise at Foreign Office questions, and it would also be worthy of debate either on the Adjournment or in Westminster Hall.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend has had enough time to look at my blog today. More's the pity if not, but if she has, she will have been concerned to see that Taunton Deane has built up a secret land bank of houses with a nod and a wink from the leader of the council. Many millions of pounds are involved, and it smells and looks like corruption on an enormous scale. Before things get out of hand, please may we have time for a debate to discuss the matter, and to consider local government and how planning authorities are working in this country?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend knows that I spend most mornings doing nothing but read his blog. He raises a serious issue that I am sure he will want to take up directly with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): May we have a debate on the National Audit Office's damning report on the closure of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs offices, such as the one in my constituency? I received a letter from the Chancellor just yesterday, confirming that a decision about committing public funds was made during the election period, which looks very much like a breach of the ministerial code. This Parliament must have the opportunity to scrutinise such things properly before decisions are made.

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Lady knows, the consultation took place over a long period of time, and the decision on the closure was not contrary to the ministerial code. She will also be aware that, as we discussed last week, the decisions on closures have been taken to try to maximise the best use of taxpayer resources. More coaches are being provided to try to help people get back into work, and costs of travel are being accommodated where it can be shown to be further than would be reasonably expected.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): May we have a debate in Government time on the activities of rogue debt management companies such as Compass Debt

[Chris Williamson]

Councillors? The company operated in my constituency and went into liquidation last year, owing 1,700 people a total of £5.5 million after it emptied the coffers year on year, taking out hundreds of thousands of pounds. Is it not time that this kind of spivvry was outlawed once and for all?

Andrea Leadsom: I am incredibly sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's point. There have been some pretty awful examples of the behaviour of debt management companies. I am not familiar with the specific case, but I encourage him to take it up with the Financial Conduct Authority, which has responsibility for looking at some of these issues.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): One of the many casualties of the recent general election has been the Government's consultation on sentences and penalties for those causing death by dangerous driving. The consultation finished on 1 February 2017, and my attempts to find out the results have been met with evasive non-answers. May we have a statement on the progress of that consultation?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point, and I will certainly look into it. If I may, I will write with any information I am able to give her.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a similar point to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), three weeks ago I raised the issue of HMRC office contracts being signed during purdah. The Leader of the House received a letter from me, but I have not had a response. The Chancellor was asked this question two weeks ago, and he has not responded to me either. May I press upon the Leader of the House the urgency of having a debate or a statement—preferably a debate—on the issue, which affects all nations and regions of the United Kingdom, of why this Government negotiated contracts during purdah when, at the general election, four political parties opposed HMRC office closures?

Andrea Leadsom: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that he has written to me and not had a reply?

Chris Stephens indicated assent.

Andrea Leadsom: I apologise for that. I have not seen his letter, but I can assure him that I will always try to reply within a week to any hon. Member who writes to me. I reassure him that I specifically checked, and there was no breaking of the ministerial code. I cannot find the note in my folder giving the precise detail, but I am aware that the consultation took place over a much longer period of time. In order to protect against some quite significant costs, the decision was taken to announce the decision to close during purdah, but that was not in breach of the ministerial code. He will forgive me for not having the precise detail, but I will certainly write to him with it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): This weekend, at Pontypool Park in my constituency, many of my constituents will take part in the 24-hour Cancer Research

UK relay for life, not only to raise funds but to show solidarity with families touched by cancer. May we have a debate on the contribution that our communities can make to supporting families blighted by this terrible disease?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that all hon. Members will be keen to support. Every one of us knows or is close to someone who has been touched by cancer, which is a frightening and horrible disease. It is fantastic to see the work of so many volunteers to try to contribute to research, so that we can get on top of cancer and find ways to cure every aspect of it. I congratulate his constituents on their efforts and I hope they enjoy their relay.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House will be aware of the terrible neglect, which has proved a national scandal, at South Lakes safari zoo. May we have a debate—a debate was in train before the snap election was called—on the lamentably inadequate national regulation? Many senior members of the organisation team that was in charge while the neglect was happening have had to be granted a new licence simply because they changed the guy at the top.

Andrea Leadsom: I recall the South Lakes zoo case that the hon. Gentleman mentions from my time as Environment Secretary, and we were all very concerned about it. It would certainly be worth his while trying to obtain an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate to raise the issue. As I recall it, the real challenge is enforcement, not the rules being inadequate, but this may be well be something worth debating to try to ensure that we get to the bottom of it.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last week, Barclays bank announced the closure of its branch in Neston, following which there will be no high street banks left in the town. May we therefore have a debate on how we can prevent communities being isolated in this way, and on what more can be done to ensure that banks are more responsible to the communities they are meant to serve?

Andrea Leadsom: This has been an issue right across the UK. The Post Office has really stepped up to the plate and I believe it now offers basic banking services for all the main UK banks and certainly for Barclays. The flexibility of post office opening hours means that many constituents can get better banking services. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman raises this issue, because one of the biggest challenges is making people aware of that fact. He knows that the banks have an agreed consultation process before they decide to close. Nevertheless, I urge him to look at the prospects for post offices stepping into the gap.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): By September, we will not have had an Opposition day debate for a staggering seven and a half months. In the interim, may we have a debate in Government time, because I, for one, want to debate the capped expenditure process, which will lead to massive cuts in York's already underfunded NHS?

Andrea Leadsom: This is obviously the subject of the day for Labour Members. I have explained several times that we are making efforts to deal with all of these normal things: the re-establishment of Committees, the dates for Opposition day debates and so on. The hon. Lady will be well aware that next Thursday there is a pre-recess Adjournment debate, where she will have the opportunity to raise the specifics of the NHS in her constituency, for which I know she is a great advocate. I urge colleagues right across the House to try to understand that this is normal following a general election, and we need to focus on working together to try to deliver for the people of this country.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week, in a very animated response to a question from me, the Leader of the House advised that the Secretary of State for Scotland spent

“hours and hours of committed time”

on

“the discussion of a package of fiscal reliefs to support the oil and gas sector”.

The reliefs that came through were welcome. She continued by saying that,

“he spent hours with me working on a supply chain”.

But she omitted to say that the oil and gas sector is still awaiting action on late-life asset transfers and loan guarantees promised in 2016. I want the Secretary of State for Scotland not to spend hours on these matters, but to spend days, weeks and months, if necessary, to get Government action. Will the Leader of the House therefore advise on what discussions the Secretary of State had with her in her role as Minister in this area? She concluded her answer last week by saying that he has always

“spoken up for the people of Scotland at every opportunity.”—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2017; Vol. 626, c. 1354.]

Will she therefore explain why he always avoids answering my questions on the discussions he has had with the relevant Departments? Will she speak to him about that, and will she once again list his achievements for Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot possibly explain to him why the Secretary of State for Scotland thinks something or does something; I am sure he will realise that that is not a question for me. However, I am extremely pleased that the hon. Gentleman now acknowledges what I did say in some spirited fashion last week, which was that I absolutely recall the Secretary of State for Scotland standing up for Scottish people on protecting and promoting the oil and gas sector—he continues to do that. If the hon. Gentleman would like to talk to him about it, I am sure he will be able to speak for himself about exactly where he is on his support for the people of Scotland.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I am lucky in my constituency to take part in parkrun on a Saturday morning; hundreds of local people now run regularly because the Parc Bryn Bach athletics club has its own Couch to 5k programme. May we have a statement on promoting physical activity and improving public health? Finally, why will the Government not give us our fair share of Opposition day debates for the next two years?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his evident fitness and healthy approach to life. I hope that that will extend to his approach to the work in this Chamber over the next few years. It is absolutely vital that we do more to promote a healthy lifestyle. This Government have put a great deal of money into new cycling programmes, new sports for children in schools and so on, but I must also mention all the work that volunteers do to develop these programmes for running together through the park. It is a lovely thing to do and it also adds to the health of the nation, so I congratulate him on that.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): May we have an early debate on this week’s report by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration on the failure of the Border Force to monitor properly small ports for immigration, smuggling and illegal migration issues—issues that were raised by me 18 months ago in parliamentary questions in this House. Perhaps it is the sort of issue that we could have an Opposition day debate on if we were granted one.

Andrea Leadsom: The problem is that, by the time we get to an Opposition day, there will be about 20 different subjects, and no one will agree on what exactly they want to debate. Let us get away from the process, and focus instead on the important subjects. The right hon. Gentleman does raise an important subject and I am quite sure that he will want to put in for an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss that very report.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Manchester Royal Infirmary has had to stop congenital heart surgery because staff have been leaving following the uncertainty caused by the review which the right hon. Lady referred to earlier. Patients now have to travel up to 150 miles for treatment. May we have a statement on how we can continue to deliver local congenital heart services to those patients in advance of the review?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. As I said earlier, NHS England is running a review of congenital heart services across the country before finally deciding on and implementing any change. This review is not about cutting services or costs, but about ensuring that patients have the very highest standards of care. He will appreciate, as will all hon. Members, that as improvements in medical technology and medical capabilities continue, we will need to look at the best delivery to give every child and adult the best outcomes that we can.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on income inequality, because research from the Resolution Foundation shows that, for the decade to 2020, we have had the lowest wage growth in 210 years? In that debate, may we also look at the contract-cutting wage promoted by Her Majesty’s Government that discriminates against the under-25s?

Andrea Leadsom: Youth unemployment in this country has dropped dramatically since 2010. It has been one of the enormous achievements in this country. Another enormous achievement has been the number of new apprenticeships that have been taken up. A third

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achievement of this Government has been the number of disadvantaged 18-year-olds going into higher education. We have a very strong, positive track record for what we are doing for the under-25s. There is still much more to do, but in terms of getting them into work, into apprenticeships and into higher education, we have a good track record.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The planned closure and relocation of Department for Work and Pensions offices will have a major negative impact on the local economy of towns such as Merthyr Tydfil in my constituency as well as many others across the country. It will also cause major travel difficulties for employees with caring responsibilities. May I ask the Leader of the House to urge the Secretary of State to carry out a full impact assessment and bring the results of that assessment, together with the results of any consultation, to the House as soon as possible—perhaps for an Opposition day debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman knows that, in looking at maximising the value for taxpayers from managing the estate, any Government Department will always look at ensuring that access is good enough and that the service is at least as good as it was previously. He will also appreciate that we need to live within our means. We have taken huge steps to getting back to a position in which we spend only what we take instead of adding to the debt and deficit that was left by the last Labour Government. It is vital that, where we can, we seize the opportunities to get better value for the taxpayer out of our Government estate.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): May we have a debate on the future of Durham Tees Valley airport, the promise made by the Tees Valley Mayor to buy it, and the Government's position on whether his nationalisation plans will be funded from the public purse?

Andrea Leadsom: I think we all welcome additional air travel opportunities, and this sounds to me like an ideal opportunity for an Adjournment debate.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): As we rapidly approach summer and our thoughts turn

to holidays, many of our constituents might need to send money abroad. May we have a statement from Ministers on the payment services regulations and the results of the Government's recent research on transparency and consumer decisions on foreign exchange transactions?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the very important issue of people going on holiday. I wish everybody who is about to embark on their holidays, including those in this place, a good time. He should probably raise his specific point during oral questions, as I am not sure that he has given me enough information to respond with exactly what he is after.

Valerie Vaz: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Let me just clear something up. Normally, points of order would come after a statement, but if this is a special point of order on a point of clarification and is relevant to business questions I will take it now.

Valerie Vaz: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I, through you, ask the Leader of the House to clarify whether she announced new business in the form of an Opposition day in the short sitting in September, and if so, on what date that will be?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Leader of the House want to respond?

Andrea Leadsom: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. What I said to the House is that through the usual channels I am aware that an Opposition day debate is being offered during that short sitting in September.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can you clarify that there is a means by which the Leader of the House can correct the record? She has suggested today that it is utterly normal for us not to have Opposition day debates at this stage, but in fact in 2015, by the summer recess after the general election, we had already had five—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not opening up the debate. The question has been dealt with and we will now move on.

Counter-Daesh Update

11.32 am

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to update the House on the counter-Daesh campaign in Iraq and Syria and the UK's involvement in this collective effort by some 68 coalition nations as well as the Arab League, Interpol, the European Union and NATO.

On Monday, three years after Daesh leader al-Baghdadi declared his so-called caliphate at the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, Prime Minister Abadi declared victory in Mosul. It was an important moment. Today, Daesh's black flags no longer fly. Its fighters are dead or fleeing, and only very small pockets of resistance remain in west Mosul. I am sure that the whole House will join me in praising those involved in the operation. Over the past nine months, Iraqi security forces, including the Kurdish peshmerga, have fought in incredibly challenging conditions to root out a callous enemy. Over 1,200 Iraqi soldiers have been killed in the fight for Mosul and more than 6,000 have been wounded; I pay tribute to their courage and sacrifice. They have been supported since September 2014, with the permission of this House, by the RAF, whose precision strikes represent two-thirds of the coalition effort outside the US operations against more than 750 Daesh targets. The Army has trained more than 58,000 local Iraqi personnel in skills from counter-IED to medical support. The Royal Navy has helped to protect the US and French aircraft carriers from which strikes have been flown. The UK's cyber-capability has helped to disrupt the extremists' activities. As a result, in Iraq more than 1.8 million people have been freed from Daesh's cruel rule.

Daesh has now lost more than 70% of the territory that it once occupied in Iraq, but the liberation of Mosul does not mean that Daesh has been defeated in Iraq, or indeed in Syria. We in this country need no reminding of the danger that Daesh still poses. In the past few months, our nation has suffered three appalling attacks inspired by the ideology shared by Daesh. We must continue our comprehensive strategy to defeat it, and I want to update the House on three areas.

The first is the military effort. We must ensure that there are no safe havens for Daesh in Syria and Iraq. That is why Iraqi security forces, with United Kingdom support, will go on to defeat Daesh in Tal Afar and Hawija, uproot it from the Euphrates river valley, and clear the area of the improvised explosive devices that threaten the lives of so many innocent civilians. As Iraq is secured—we have some months to go—we will in Syria continue supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, who have so far ejected Daesh from around 51% of the territory it once held in Syria.

The battle for Raqqa—Daesh's command and control centre—has begun. Syrian Democratic Forces currently control around 20% of that city. The SDF is relying heavily on coalition air assets, surveillance, reconnaissance, and pinpoint missile strikes, which we will continue to provide as part of the global coalition. As we maintain pressure on Mosul and Raqqa, we will continue to tighten the net around this callous organisation, squeezing the terrorists on simultaneous fronts, striking their senior

leadership, countering their poisonous narrative, and cutting off their finances, as they progressively lose access to the oil infrastructure on which they relied.

The second area is humanitarian aid. We will continue to provide stabilisation and humanitarian assistance. My right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary updated this House yesterday on the humanitarian response required in Mosul, yet while that city can at last begin to look forward, the humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire: 13.5 million people urgently need humanitarian assistance; 4.5 million of them are in areas that are hard to reach, and 1.3 million of them live under siege-like conditions. It is estimated that around 100,000 civilians remain in Raqqa city, caught between Daesh and Assad, and in desperate need of aid.

Our response has been to commit £2.46 billion to support for Syria—the largest ever British response to a single humanitarian crisis—while pushing for better access, so that much-needed food and medicine can reach people, and for an end to attacks on civilians. UK support has helped to stabilise the region more widely. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have become hosts to large-scale Syrian populations. The Department for International Development has helped to ensure that those countries have been given the assistance that they need in hosting large refugee populations; this improves regional security and reduces consequent migration pressures in Europe.

The third area is stronger governance. Humanitarian aid is only part of the answer. A meaningful political settlement is needed now to guarantee sustainable peace, so we are working with our international allies to strengthen regional governance. With regard to Iraq, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary emphasised to Foreign Minister al-Jaafari at their recent meeting in London, that means focusing on inclusive politics post-Mosul, allaying fears, addressing the grievances that led to the rise of Daesh, and sticking to the April 2018 election timetable.

In Syria, the barbaric chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikoun in April reminds us that the Assad regime is no partner for peace. We continue to work for a transition towards new governance, which is fully representative and committed to protecting the rights of everyone in Syria. It is for Syrians to decide how that happens, as part of a Syrian-led transition process, but to reach that goal we continue to support the work of United Nations Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura as well as the political process he is overseeing in Geneva. We are engaging with the opposition to help them move towards a political settlement, and we use our role in the Security Council and our participation in the International Syria Support Group to push for progress.

The recently negotiated ceasefire and de-escalation agreement brokered by the United States, Russia and Jordan is welcome. We hope it will lead to further de-escalation agreements and generate renewed momentum in the political process, but that all depends on all the parties involved, which we encourage now to comply. We have seen these agreements before. What will count is what holds on the ground.

As I took office three years ago, Daesh was closing in on the gates of Baghdad. Today it is a failing organisation, but one that remains a threat. Mosul has now been liberated, but the war remains to be won in Iraq as well as in Syria. Our resolve, as a leading member of the

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coalition, is unwavering. We will continue to do all we can to defeat Daesh, counter its warped ideology, bring stability to the region, and provide greater security to our people and our allies at home and abroad.

11.41 am

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it.

The liberation of Mosul marks the end of three years of Daesh control of the city, and we pay tribute to all the personnel who have taken part in the campaign, especially to our servicemen and women who have served in Operation Shader. Although the battle for Mosul has almost concluded, the fight against Daesh in Iraq and the wider region is far from over. Will the Secretary of State tell us about the nature of the support that the UK will continue to provide to Iraqi ground troops as they advance westward to clear the remaining towns and cities in Iraq that are under Daesh control?

Our armed forces have taken every precaution to prevent civilian casualties, and intelligence and targeting are vital to that, but the Secretary of State will be aware that Amnesty International has produced a report that is highly critical of the Iraqi Government and the coalition. It has been alleged that the actions of the coalition in Mosul have been “disproportionate” and even “unlawful”. Major General Rupert Jones, the deputy commander of the international anti-Daesh coalition, has condemned the report in the strongest possible terms, saying that it is “deeply irresponsible”. He has emphatically stated that we should not forget that it is Daesh that is “deliberately killing civilians”. What is the Secretary of State’s response to Amnesty’s report?

The Iraqi Government have concerns about the possibility of Daesh fighters crossing back into Iraq from Syria, so what role will our armed forces play in ensuring the security of the border between Iraq and Syria? As the operation against Daesh moves from one of counter-insurgency to counter-terrorism, the training that the UK provides to Iraqi forces will prove all the more essential. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the support and training that we will continue to give to the Iraqi ground forces?

The campaign against Daesh in Syria is undoubtedly more challenging and complex than in Iraq. Although I appreciate that there are limitations on what the Defence Secretary is able to tell the House, will he be a little more specific on the role our armed forces will have in the liberation of Raqqa from Daesh control?

Finally, as the Secretary of State will be aware, a number of Members on both sides of the House, including my hon. Friend the shadow Defence Secretary, have been calling for an operational service medal for personnel on Operation Shader. As the campaign in Mosul draws to a close, I would suggest that it is now the time to provide proper recognition to all those who have served on that operation and played a vital part in the fight against Daesh and its perverse ideology.

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said, particularly about the role of our servicemen. A large number of our servicemen and women have now served in this theatre for nearly three

years, sometimes under the most intense conditions, and it is right that we should, on both sides of this House, pay tribute to them.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the next stage of this campaign. It is important to emphasise that Mosul itself has not finally fallen; there is still a small pocket of resistance. Indeed, a Tornado and a Typhoon were over the city yesterday, bombing a final Daesh position, so there is still work to be done there. There will be work to be done to assist Iraqi forces in the capture of Tal Afar and Nineveh, so the campaign goes on and may well become more complex as Daesh spreads out and moves to some of the less populated areas.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the Amnesty report. I have not seen the Amnesty report as of yet, but I would certainly recommend that he does heed, as he has done, the words of Major General Rupert Jones, who is the deputy coalition commander. I can reassure the House that, so far as our own participation in the coalition is concerned, the airstrikes that we carry out are absolutely lawful and are conducted in accordance with the law of armed conflict and international humanitarian law. We have rigorous rules of engagement, which I set at the beginning of the campaign. There are very robust targeting procedures. Where the RAF are involved, they gather intelligence about the target they are aiming to strike. They strike it with a choice of weapon that is designed to absolutely minimise the risk of civilian casualties. They go back afterwards and do an assessment of the blast area and whether there were any unforeseen consequences.

Where there are allegations that the wrong building was hit or that there have been civilian casualties, again, we on the coalition side absolutely investigate those allegations. We publish the findings. This is in distinction to what the Russians and the Syrian regime have been doing in Syria. We investigate, we publish the findings, and if mistakes were made and procedures need to be corrected, that is done. But I want to assure the House that I have seen no evidence as of yet that an RAF strike has involved civilian casualties. I wait to see that evidence being produced, and if anybody has any evidence, it needs to be forwarded to us, as, indeed, other organisations, like Airwars, have been doing throughout the conflict, and we are ready to investigate. Otherwise, I would urge extreme caution in the handling of the Amnesty report.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the border area between Iraq and Syria. It is that middle bit of the Euphrates river valley where we now anticipate Daesh will coalesce, having been driven out of Raqqa in Syria eventually, and from Mosul and Tal Afar in Iraq. Our training effort will now be, of course, in Iraq. The training we do at al-Asad airbase in Anbar province will be to improve the capability of the Iraqi forces to police their border, having secured it. We will be doing more of that in conjunction with our other allies.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the campaign in Syria. We will continue with airstrikes. Again yesterday, a pair of our aircraft were in action on the edge of Raqqa, assisting that campaign. There is a lot of work to be done before Raqqa is liberated, and other towns in the Euphrates river valley, such as Mayadin, remain under Daesh control. The air campaign—the reconnaissance and the intelligence-gathering—will

probably become even more important as Daesh eventually moves from Raqqa and starts to disperse round some of these smaller towns.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about medallic recognition. I think the whole House would want to see this huge effort properly rewarded. I am awaiting final advice from the military on that, and I hope to make an announcement shortly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): On his re-election, I call Dr Julian Lewis.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The reason why, surely, these cities have not been liberated sooner is precisely the care that is being taken in the targeting of the aerial bombardment. Does the Secretary of State accept that whereas the intervention with airstrikes in Iraq was non-controversial because we were prepared to see the army of the Iraqi Government win, the same does not apply in Syria? Apart from the Kurdish elements in Syria, who else does he expect to run the country when Daesh's land is taken from it, if not the Syrian Government, with or without Assad?

Sir Michael Fallon: Let me repeat your congratulations, Mr Deputy Speaker, to my right hon. Friend on resuming his chairmanship of the Select Committee. I look forward to working with him on that.

I know that my right hon. Friend and I have always differed on the nature of the Syrian campaign and that he has had reservations about it. He is right to recognise the difference in that we are not working with the Syrian regime. However, we do want to see Daesh driven out of Syria. It remains a threat—in Syria, to this country—and it needs to be defeated in Syria. But of course, as he says, we then need those parts of Syria returned to civilian control—a control that properly involves the Arab population as well as, in the north, the Kurdish elements. That is all part of the process that we are encouraging in Geneva. He is right that the solution lies in Arab-led governance.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I, too, thank the Defence Secretary for his statement and advance notice of it. Let me put on record the tribute of Scottish National party Members to the forces who have been involved, particularly in liberating Mosul to the extent that it has been. I also extend our congratulations to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on his re-election as Chair of the Defence Committee.

Scottish National party Members, and indeed the whole House, will welcome the diminished status that Daesh now has. While there is a difference of opinion as to how to move that from a diminished status to being defeated, there is of course unanimity that defeated it must be.

There are two particular areas of concern that I would like the Defence Secretary to address. The first is the dramatic rise in civilian casualties in the past few weeks. In June alone, there was a 52% increase on May's estimated figure of 529 to 744, according to Airwars, which he mentioned in response to the shadow Minister. Airwars claims that of the 1,350 UK personnel fighting Daesh, not one is permanently tasked with monitoring

civilian casualties. Will he make a commitment to greater scrutiny and transparency on that, and will he ensure that there are dedicated monitoring and investigation mechanisms within Operation Shader for UK forces?

The second point—the Defence Secretary knows of my particular concern about this because I have written to him specifically about it—is about the operation in Syria itself. The 2015 mandate of this House was very clearly about targeting Daesh, and nobody else in Syria. I tried to get some clarity from him on this on Monday. I do not know whether he misunderstood my question, but I did not get the clarity I was seeking. Will he confirm that the 2015 mandate to target Daesh stands, and that the Government have no plans to expand that target to any other actor; and that if they do, as the US President seems to wish the United Kingdom to do, it will happen only on the back of a debate and vote of Members of this House?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the tribute he has paid to our armed forces. It is worth reminding the House that the Scottish nationalists voted against military action in both Iraq and Syria. It is all very well to say that they now welcome the fact that Daesh has been defeated in Iraq, but how much longer would Daesh have continued to behead people, to shoot people and to throw gays off buildings without air power, including British air power, and without the involvement of 68 countries around the world, but not the support of the Scottish nationalists? He should reflect on that.

We work with Airwars when it has allegations and suspects that there might have been British aircraft in the air at the time in question. We look at that information and investigate it. So far we have not found any evidence of civilian casualties being caused by a British strike, but we continue to work with Airwars, and if it has fresh evidence it should put it to us and we will investigate it. As I indicated, we also carry out what is called a battle damage assessment after any strike to see exactly what effect it has had and whether there is any risk that there may have been casualties.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the increase in civilian casualties in the final weeks of the battle in west Mosul. It is a highly compact and densely populated city, and Daesh pushed civilians into buildings, held them hostage and shot them if they tried to escape. This was intense urban warfare of a type that we have not been involved in since probably the second world war—a very complex military operation. However, it would not have been easier if it had been extended and we had let it drift on for months. The job had to be done, and I pay tribute to those involved in it, including our pilots for their skill and precision alongside the rest of the coalition.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about Syria, as he did on Monday. He has also written to me about it—I have in fact replied to him; I signed the letter yesterday, but he may not have had it yet. It certainly gives clarity on the point that he raised with me.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is the expectation of sufficient reform in Iraq realistic?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, indeed. The Abadi Government are representative of all parts of Iraq. Abadi himself is a Shi'a; the President of Iraq, whom I met, is a Kurd;

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and my opposite number, the Defence Minister, is a Sunni. They are a genuinely representative Government, but they have work to do to provide reassurance, particularly to the Sunni populations and tribes of Nineveh and Anbar provinces in the west, that they too have a stake in modern Iraq and must feel part of it, and that they will be protected from any kind of Shi'a aggression such as they have suffered from in the past. The Government are representative and have lasted longer than some critics originally suggested they would, but they now have a huge amount of work to do to stabilise the areas that have been liberated and promote genuine political reconciliation.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State referred twice to Staffan de Mistura's negotiations in Geneva, but he did not mention the Russian-Turkish-Iranian initiative and the meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan. What is the British Government's assessment of the role of that process and the fact that it seems to be undermining efforts in Geneva?

Sir Michael Fallon: We support any genuine efforts to reduce violence in Syria and bring the civil war to an end, but we cannot endorse the Astana process for a number of reasons, principally because of the status it gives Iran as a guarantor of Syria's future. That is not acceptable. We want the pluralist type of governance in Syria that we now have in Iraq, and that does not require further interference from Iran.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend refer in both his statement and his answers to the need for inclusive politics post-Mosul in order to win the peace, as well as the war, in Iraq. Can he assure the House that Her Majesty's Government will keep up the pressure on the Abadi regime to ensure that the new governor of Mosul fully respects the rights and needs of all sections of the population there?

Sir Michael Fallon: Absolutely. The answer to that is an unequivocal yes. It is now so important that the city administrations and the governorates get engaged in the process of political reconciliation. My Foreign Office colleagues and I continue to urge that on the Abadi Government as an absolute precondition for the kind of reconciliation that we want to see.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the liberation of Mosul and pay tribute to members of our armed forces who have been involved. The tactics used by Daesh mean that the cost to both the infrastructure and the people of Mosul has been great. Will the Secretary of State outline what strategy Iraq could take to rebuild the infrastructure of Mosul and to allow the return of those refugees who have fled Mosul over the past few years?

Sir Michael Fallon: An encouraging number of dispossessed Maslawis—people of Mosul—are returning to east Mosul. They are returning in quite large numbers now, and markets and schools are beginning to reopen. West Mosul has of course been much more badly damaged than east Mosul and a huge amount of reconstruction has to be done there. That will be led by

the United Nations Development Programme and its co-ordinator, but we will be playing our part financially and in the organisation of the rebuilding programme.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): RAF pilots and service personnel have played a vital role in this coalition campaign, particularly my constituents flying from RAF Coningsby. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking my constituents who have taken part in Operation Shader? Will he explain, please, the vital role that the RAF plays in ensuring freedom of movement on the ground, which enables Iraqi forces to combat Daesh?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is right that we pay tribute to the RAF, and not only to the pilots, who are always mentioned on occasions such as this, but to the huge numbers of other RAF members, such as the air crew, those who service, maintain and guard the planes, and those involved in the intelligence work of studying and preparing the targets. It has been a massive effort. The RAF is working at probably its highest tempo for more than a quarter of a century, and it is right that we should pay proper tribute to it.

The role of the RAF has been huge. Noticeably, more than 60% of the strikes not conducted by the United States in Mosul were conducted by the RAF and not by any other country, simply because of the precision of our pilots, the intelligence that goes into the selection of targets and the precision of the weapons that were chosen for each of those strikes. Now, the RAF will be increasingly involved in close air support as Daesh moves out of the cities and starts to coalesce along the Euphrates river valley.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the men and women of our armed forces and the civilians who support them. Given that operations against Daesh are likely to endure for some time and that since the previous defence and security review we have had a change to our national security context, a general election and a referendum in which Britain decided to leave the European Union, what plans do the Government now have to conduct a strategic defence and security review?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, as I indicated, the campaign in Iraq is not over. It has many months to run, and I expect British forces to be involved well into 2018. The situation in Syria is even more complex. The work of the RAF and Army trainers is likely to continue for some time.

The previous strategic defence review was only 18 months ago. The threats that were set out in it—from Russian aggression, Daesh, other terrorism and cyber—remain the principal ones facing this country. That review did not forecast the referendum or indeed its result, but I do not think we can blame defence intelligence for that—a lot of people did not predict that event. However, the review was only 18 months ago, although we will of course have a look to see if any of it needs any kind of refresh.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The role of the British armed forces in mentoring and training our Iraqi allies has been critical to the success of the operation. What plans do we have for continuing that support to the Iraqi military into the future?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question and I pay tribute to his own service. It is worth reminding the House that we are in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi Government. Everything that we have done as part of the coalition has been with the authority and at the request and invitation of the Iraqi Government. Although we have not entered into those discussions, I anticipate that the Iraqi Government would welcome the continuation of the coalition's training effort and indeed the support of air power until Daesh is completely eliminated from their borders.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all welcome the progress made in defeating Daesh in Mosul and Raqqa and pay tribute to the bravery and tenacity of the forces on the ground and in the air in liberating so many people from Daesh's cruel yoke. The Secretary of State has set out in great detail the effort that the RAF makes to avoid civilian casualties—rightly, in view of the terms of the resolutions of September 2014 and December 2015 that the House passed. Is he satisfied that all our partners in the air campaign are making the same efforts to avoid civilian casualties?

Sir Michael Fallon: Certainly, as far as I can be. There are coalition rules of engagement and there are slightly different rules of engagement for each country involved in the campaign. It is perfectly true that targets have been offered or discussed within the coalition that we have chosen not to strike because of the rules that we apply. Each country approaches the matter in a slightly different way. However, the principal dozen air forces involved all work together in the same headquarters, and the rules that apply have become closer over the duration of the campaign. It is worth saying that, sadly, it is simply not possible to liberate a densely populated city such as Mosul without civilian casualties. Of course, those casualties have been made much worse by Daesh's policy of holding civilians hostage in buildings, shooting people trying to escape the city and generally making the population continue to suffer.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the role that our armed forces have played and the progress that has been made. Will he reassure me that he is working closely with the Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt)—I know that we all greatly welcome him back to the Front Bench—and our allies in the region to ensure that, as Daesh is pushed back, its fighters are contained and not displaced to pop up elsewhere in the region?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, that is an increasing part of the work of the counter-Daesh coalition, in which I participate in so far as the defence effort is concerned, and in which my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East participate on foreign policy. We work across the coalition to ensure that we can share intelligence on returning fighters, explore how Daesh leadership can now be held properly to account—let us not forget the British hostages who were beheaded two to three years ago—and that, where possible, those who committed those most heinous crimes can now be brought to justice.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With more Yazidi women being freed this week with the liberation of Mosul, will the Secretary of State say more about the particular case of the Yazidis and whether the Government have reached a conclusion on whether their treatment by Daesh is genocide?

Sir Michael Fallon: We continue to look for more evidence, specifically on the Yazidis, to ascertain whether the brutal treatment that they suffered was genocidal. We are also accumulating evidence across the board so that those who are eventually detained can be properly held to account.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying particular tribute to the Kurdish peshmerga, who have made a vital and continuing contribution to the defeat of Daesh? Can he assure the House that we will give them every possible assistance in training, equipment and weaponry, but also, importantly, access to medical care and treatment for their wounded? Is not there a case for providing additional, specialist care here in the UK for their most badly wounded?

Sir Michael Fallon: I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East is looking at that specific point, but I too pay tribute to the peshmerga, and, indeed, to what has been an all-Iraq effort. There has not been the distinction that people fear between the different groupings in Iraq. The campaign to liberate Mosul was conducted by agreement between the different parts of the Iraqi forces, and that was done successfully. We played our part in helping to train peshmerga forces, and much of the training that we supplied was designed precisely to reduce the number of battlefield casualties that they might otherwise have suffered, particularly from improvised explosive devices.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and I agree with the Secretary of State that an important element of progress is countering the violent extremist ideology of Daesh and others. Does he agree that one of the most eloquent ways of doing that is demonstrating, through the reconstruction of Mosul and Raqqa and the establishment of law and order and security for the people who live there, that there are better systems of governing than those provided by ISIL?

Sir Michael Fallon: Absolutely. It must be central to the work of stabilisation and reconciliation that we have a form of governance in Mosul, in the council there and in the wider provincial government, that is genuinely representative of all interests in Mosul, which is a very complex city, to ensure that all those living there have a proper stake in its future, and that the conditions under which the likes of Daesh originally flourished do not re-emerge.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I join others in welcoming the statement and the liberation of Mosul, but what steps are the Government taking, as Daesh is defeated, to deal with the threat posed by dangerous individuals who seek to return to the United Kingdom?

Sir Michael Fallon: The purpose of part of the work that is being done in the coalition is to recover sensitive material in both Mosul and Raqqa—as the Syrian democratic forces move into Raqqa—that will enable us to track down foreign fighters, particularly British fighters, who have been based in either city, and, indeed, foreign fighters in those cities who have been involved in planning external attacks on the cities of western Europe. We are urgently trying to recover that material, which will enable us to identify more of those who are involved in planning of that kind and thus ensure that they are detained and properly held to account.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I ask a question on the same theme? The Secretary of State mentioned Interpol. Welcome though the liberation of Mosul is, we know that the capacity to deal with returnees from Iraq poses a challenge to our already overstretched intelligence and counter-terrorism services. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that the Government have sufficient capacity, not just in this country but throughout Europe, to ensure that returnees are dealt with appropriately?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. We are putting extra resources into our agencies to ensure that that is being done in this country, and we are working with other police forces across the coalition to share intelligence about the foreign fighters who are identified so that we have better information when they attempt to cross the borders back into western Europe, and so that each of us understands how we are now likely to prosecute those who have been involved in the fighting.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), does my right hon. Friend agree that we should pay special tribute to those in the Kurdistan region? They are building democracy, they have a rule of law, and they made a huge effort in defeating Daesh. Can my right hon. Friend guarantee not just that we will give military support, but that we will do everything possible to help them to build their emerging democracy?

Sir Michael Fallon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his election to the chairmanship of the Education Committee. I am sure that my colleagues look forward to working with him.

We work very closely with the Kurdish authorities—I meet the Prime Minister and president there regularly—and we want to see the economy and stability of the region improve. It is, of course, part of Iraq overall, and the future of Iraq, ultimately, is for the Iraqi people to determine.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The fact that, apparently, there is currently no evidence that a single civilian casualty has resulted from an RAF strike during this campaign is extraordinary and commendable. Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), may I ask what influence the UK armed forces can have on some of our coalition partners, in whose cases the rules of engagement have clearly been different and the civilian death toll has been higher?

Sir Michael Fallon: I was, I hope, careful to remind the House that this is war. While we as a coalition do everything to try to minimise the risk of civilian casualties, it is not possible to eliminate that risk entirely when we are trying to free cities from terrorism of this kind. I was equally careful to say that there is no evidence yet from an RAF strike. I am not claiming that that might never be the case, but so far no such evidence has been presented to us.

We work across the coalition with the other countries involved in airstrikes to ensure that we apply broadly the same rules of engagement: that we are selecting the same targets, for instance, and that we have the same institutions, such as mosques and hospitals, on our no-strike lists. Each country is slightly different; there are variations; but what we encourage our partners to do—and I think this is the best possible answer to the regime in Syria—is to be straight, and when an allegation is made, to investigate it, publish the findings, and if it then becomes clear that there were faults in procedures, set out how they will be put right.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Daesh's atrocities have failed to deliver a caliph, let alone the so-called caliphate. As Daesh are flushed out of Mosul, they will convene in other parts of Iraq and Syria. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must recognise that our military will continue to play a role in defeating Daesh for a considerable time to come?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. The military campaign is not over yet, in Iraq or indeed in Syria. We have every interest in staying the course, because we need to keep our country safe. There are still people in Raqqa who wish us harm and want to carry out attacks in this country and in other western European cities. We must not rest until that threat is removed, and then we must pay attention to what the Iraqi authorities want and to the scale of the training that they may now require.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see so many Members entering the Chamber to hear my question. [Laughter.]

I pay tribute to our amazing armed forces personnel, who have acted with the utmost bravery and dedication in this conflict, and I second the calls for an operational service medal to be awarded. Given the special role that the Army has played in training during the conflict, among its many other roles, and given the depth, breadth and complexity of the operations that it now faces not only in this theatre but around the world, does the Secretary of State agree that this would be exactly the wrong time to reduce the number of our regular Army personnel?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful for the tribute that the hon. Gentleman paid to our armed forces. He will have heard what I said earlier about the issue of medallic recognition for personnel who served in this particular campaign. We have no plans to cut the size of the Army; indeed, in our manifesto we made a clear commitment to maintain the size of our armed forces.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The liberation of Mosul is a significant moment in our battle against Daesh, but does the Secretary of State

agree that the real victory will be the creation of a modern Iraqi state that is capable of governing itself for all the people of Iraq and of ensuring that it resists any infiltration by Daesh as we clear it out of Iraqi territory?

Sir Michael Fallon: I absolutely agree. The kind of modern Iraqi state to which my hon. Friend aspires would not only reduce any threat to our country but would be good for the stability of the region. Iraq is already a democracy—a fragile democracy, but it is a democracy. It has called on its friends and allies throughout the world for help. Sixty-eight countries are in there, helping to bring about the kind of modern Iraq that he and I want.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and thank him for his commitment and leadership. I also thank our soldiers for the significant contribution that they have made to delivering the peace. The peshmerga have been a critical part of the allied forces to defeat Daesh, with many peshmerga fighters coming from Kurdistan. The regional government in Kurdistan wishes to have more devolved responsibilities and is seeking the release of moneys held in Baghdad for reconstruction. To deliver the transition to new governance that is fully representative and committed to protecting the rights of everyone, will he agree to those two issues being dealt with right away?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful for the personal words with which the hon. Gentleman began his remarks. Discussions are under way between the Kurdish authorities and the authorities in Baghdad on precisely those issues. We encourage those discussions. In the end, where there are disputes of that kind, they have to be resolved between the different parties in Erbil and Baghdad.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The progress militarily in Mosul is welcome, but the poisonous ideology that underpins ISIL continues. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the number of UK citizens fighting on behalf of ISIL/Daesh? What is happening about those who choose to return home, so that we can apprehend them and ensure that they are not a danger to UK citizens?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, we have not yet defeated the virtual caliphate. It is important that, across the coalition, we now intensify our efforts to destroy that caliphate in cyberspace as effectively as we are beginning to undermine it in Iraq itself. On returning fighters, that is predominantly a matter for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. However, Daesh is a proscribed organisation. Fighting for Daesh is a criminal offence and, where those people can be properly prosecuted, they will be charged on their return.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): In December 2015, we were assured that, with the support of UK airstrikes, we could expect to see a transitional Government in Syria within six months, and that there were 70,000 moderate ground troops ready to carry out a ground war in tandem with coalition airstrikes. What is the Secretary of State's current assessment as to when we can expect to see a transitional Government in Syria? How many of those 70,000 ground troops ever actually existed?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, of course we want Syria to move towards a new political settlement and we continue to encourage that. So far as the existence of moderate armed opposition in Syria is concerned, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that the civil war would not be in its seventh year if there had not been formidable moderate armed opposition to the Syrian regime. Who does he think has been fighting Assad? It is important to recognise the progress that has been made since December 2015 in reducing Daesh and the amount of Syrian territory that it holds, in starting the battle to defeat it in its capital, Raqqa, and thus overall to reduce the threat that Daesh poses to the UK. I am only sorry that, although we had the support of 67 other countries throughout the world, we did not have the support of the Scottish National party.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State's statement. In particular, I welcome his comment about reducing the risk and the number of civilian casualties. Perhaps for the benefit of those who have just entered the Chamber he could repeat the number of civilian casualties there have been as a result of our actions and repeat his confirmation and assurance that he will do all he can to reduce further such risks?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend but I am not sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, would welcome me repeating too much of the statement that I gave earlier. However, I emphasise that I believe it is because of the rules of engagement that we set, the careful use of intelligence and reconnaissance from the air, the skill of our pilots, and the precision of the weapons that are selected for each strike that we are able to say that, to the best of our knowledge, we have not caused significant civilian casualties on the ground.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I join the Secretary of State and Members of all parties in paying tribute to the work of the men and women in all three services. Does he agree that the important and prominent role played by the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force further reinforces this country's place as the United States' most important ally and a vital partner in the region to ensure the ultimate defeat of Daesh and to ensure peace in the region?

Sir Michael Fallon: I agree. The United States has led the coalition. I was able to review the next steps in both Iraq and Syria when I met the US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis in Washington last Friday. He and his predecessor have played a key role in leading the coalition. Like us, they now want to see us move on in Iraq to the work of stabilisation and reconciliation that must follow the military campaign.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to all those who have served so diligently to make such progress. My right hon. Friend rightly mentioned in his statement the continued determination that we need to battle this warped ideology and to achieve long-term stability in the region, but what reassurance can he give my constituents and all communities throughout the

[Mims Davies]

UK that the Government are determined to share intelligence during Brexit and beyond to keep us all safer?

Sir Michael Fallon: We have made it clear that, beyond Brexit, we want to continue the various arrangements there are for security co-operation across Europe, including co-ordination between our intelligence agencies and the work of police in tracking foreign fighters. It is only by working together that we can ensure that this ideology is defeated not simply in Iraq but on a wider basis.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I return to the question of the skill of our pilots in avoiding civilian casualties wherever possible. Can my right hon. Friend please confirm that that extends to the selection of hot and cold targets, so that targets can be changed even at the last moment to avoid those casualties?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. These are operational matters for decision by our commanders in the Gulf, but they keep those matters under review before each mission is planned and while each mission is being carried out. We had evidence of that yesterday in the strikes that a Tornado and a Typhoon together undertook in Raqqa and Mosul on the same day.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Like him, I welcome the fact that the RAF has played a key role in defeating Daesh on the battlefield. However, my concern is that it will now move from the battlefield to being a guerrilla organisation. Therefore, what support can he reassure me will be given to training local forces to deal with threats such as improvised explosive devices and others involved in a guerrilla war?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is already a key part of our training effort. We are working with the Iraqi forces, for example, as I said earlier, in strengthening their border force. We are working with the police, not simply the military, so that they are better equipped to deal with

the threat of insurgency when the final remnants of Daesh go underground, particularly in the Middle Euphrates River valley.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Defeating Daesh in its twin capitals is a key step to demolishing the myth of the caliphate but in the statement the Secretary of State also referred to undermining the poisonous ideology elsewhere. Will he expand on the steps that the Government are taking to do just that?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. We are working with our colleagues in the coalition to deal with the extremist ideology that lies behind this terrorism. We are working to counter it in cyberspace, taking down the messaging that is posted there. We are working here at home on steps to improve the deradicalisation effort where extremism exists in colleges, mosques and elsewhere. We work with the Muslim community to ensure that it is properly recognised and tackled.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Last, but hopefully not least, I would like to ask the following question of the Secretary of State. The war against Daesh is a complex form of unconventional warfare: a hard insurgency fought with other tools—cyber, governance, propaganda and so forth. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that this war will be properly studied and the lessons actually learned? There has been a tendency to see unconventional warfare as an occasional accident, when in many ways it is becoming the new norm; will it be understood and studied as such?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is a very important point and I hope it was recognised in the strategic defence review that we carried out in 2015. This war has had to be fought using the full spectrum of responses; it has been fought predominantly by, with, and through local forces, but involving a spectrum of responses right across the different domains, and it is very important that we recognise that this may well become the fighting of the future and we learn the lessons appropriately.

Parliamentary Business

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24).

12.31 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I rise to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration: the scheduling of business by the Leader of the House.

The title of the debate, if granted under this application, is that this House has considered the matter of the scheduling of parliamentary business and that, given the announcement by the Government of a two-year Session, references to “Session” in the Standing Orders should be interpreted as per year, therefore with dates allocated to be pro rata.

I have asked the Leader of the House several times for debates on issues that directly affect our constituents. We have just completed an election where we asked people to vote for us. As a parliamentary democracy, they expect us to debate and vote on motions that were relevant to their lives 31 days ago. Our constituents expected us to come back to work straight away; instead, since the Gracious Speech there have been only seven votes. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady must be heard. She has three minutes. Afterwards, if hon. Members wish to have an argument, they can have one; but the hon. Lady will be heard for her three minutes.

Valerie Vaz: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. My next sentence was “This is undermining our democracy”, and there that is, right in front of us.

As you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have asked a number of times for a debate on statutory instruments that have been prayed against, as is the usual convention, but no time has been allocated.

The second reason is to do with the days allocated for private Member’s Bills. Only 13 have been allocated for one year up until November 2018. The current Session lasts for two years.

Thirdly, at the same time not a single date has been offered, or allocated for, an Opposition day for any party. Earlier, the Leader of the House said in response to a business question that a date was offered in September, but I am not aware of that. In this debate, we would also need to clarify what a Session is. It is now two years, but we would not expect one year’s worth of Opposition days to be allocated over the two years.

In support of this application, I repeat the Prime Minister’s words: “through debate and discussion,” these are the “hallmarks of our parliamentary democracy”.

It is also important to our constitution to have the debate when required by convention as a number of statutory instruments will flow from the repeal Bill. That is why I make this application today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application from the hon. Member and have had the benefit of knowing the view expressed by Mr Speaker on the basis of the written material that the hon. Member supplied to him in advance, and I can tell the House that he is satisfied that the matter raised by the hon. Member is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. I now wish to ascertain whether the hon. Member has the leave of the House.

Application agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member has obtained the leave of the House. Mr Speaker has decided that the debate will be held on Monday 17 July, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Member’s application.

Points of Order

12.36 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think that in a moment the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will be presented. It has already been online on the parliamentary website for the last hour and a half. This is a complete breach of the Standing Orders of the House: the convention is that it is presented to the House before it is presented to anybody else. Also, we cannot get a copy of it in the Vote Office, but we can get a copy of it online. I hope that there will be an investigation into this matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the attention of the Chair, and I understand that indeed the text of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has been located on the Parliament website this morning, in advance of its presentation. This should not have happened, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that an investigation is currently under way into this most regrettable matter.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Has there been any indication from the Government Front Bench whether a Minister will come to the House to apologise for that transgression?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have said that the matter is being investigated, and I am sure that the Treasury Bench has heard the points that have been made. *[Interruption.] Order.*

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Do Ministers have any responsibility for the website of the House? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.] Order.* The House is lively this morning. Let us have a little order. I have already said that those who are responsible are carrying out an investigation, and in due course I am quite certain we will be able to report to the Chamber just what went wrong and make sure it does not happen again.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Gapes, is it really further to that point of order, because I have answered the point of order?

Mike Gapes indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Gapes.

Mike Gapes: During the investigation, will Government Ministers be questioned about how the House of Commons website obtained the document?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have already answered that point. We have important business to get on to.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm that, immediately after the presentation of the Bill and its First Reading, the Second Reading will deal with the principle of the Bill, according to “Erskine May” and all the rules of the House? Will you also confirm, with respect to this particular Bill, that although some do not seem to have seen it yet, it is about leaving the European Union and repealing the European Communities Act 1972 and that anyone who votes against its Second Reading will be in breach of that principle?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman and the House know, the Bill in question is about to be presented. When the Minister presents the Bill, it will then be there for all to see. Each Member can make their own consideration of what the Bill is about and how they would like to interpret it. If they wish to try to amend it, that is what Parliament is for. I am quite sure that we will have plenty of discussion about that in the forthcoming weeks and months.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice on an issue that was debated in Westminster Hall on Wednesday 5 July—namely, the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. The debate was very well attended, and the resolution to accept the motion was rejected. Given that we have no Opposition day debates and no opportunity for Back-Bench business debates before the recess, would it be possible to have a deferred Division on this question so that Members can have a recorded vote on it?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. It is also refreshing to have a point of order that is a point of order. My understanding is that, following the debate in Westminster Hall last week, the motion—that this House has considered the state pension age for women—was, most unusually, negatived. This might reflect the strength of feeling on the matter, but it does not have any procedural effect. The fact is that the question was put to the Members present in Westminster Hall and they came to a decision, which was to negative the motion. That has no procedural effect, but I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman and any of his colleagues wish to have the matter further considered, they will use their ingenious knowledge of parliamentary procedure to ensure that that happens.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary David Davis, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Damian Green, Mr Secretary Johnson and Mr Secretary Lidington, presented a Bill to repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and make other provision in connection with the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 5) with explanatory notes (Bill 5-EN).

Passchendaele

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now come to the general debate on the commemoration of Passchendaele—*[Interruption.]* I trust, as we are about to consider such a sombre and serious matter as those who gave their lives a century ago for the freedom that we now enjoy, that hon. Members who wish to leave the Chamber will have the decency to do so quietly. We now come to the general debate on the commemoration of Passchendaele, the third battle of Ypres.

Just before I call the Minister to introduce the debate I would like, most unusually, to welcome to the Palace of Westminster the two police officers who apprehended the murderer of our late colleague, Jo Cox. Craig Nicholls and Jonathan Wright are here with us, and we welcome them and commend them for their bravery. It is fitting that we should do so as we are about to have a debate commemorating those who gave their lives for freedom and democracy.

12.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (John Glen): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Commemoration of Passchendaele, the Third Battle of Ypres.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to reiterate your words of welcome to Mr Nicholls and Mr Wright. I am sure that the whole House is very pleased that they are with us today.

The commemoration of Passchendaele is just one of the national events in our first world war centenary programme, as announced by the previous Prime Minister in 2012. This four-year programme has seen us deliver national events on 4 August 2014 to mark the centenary of Britain's entry into the war, with services for the Commonwealth at Glasgow Cathedral, at St Symphorien military cemetery and at Westminster Abbey. In April 2015, we marked the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey and at the Cenotaph in Whitehall.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I also congratulate the two police officers on their bravery. Does the Minister have any plans to commemorate the battle of Loos?

John Glen: That is certainly something that I can consider, but I have no immediate plans at this point.

Last year on 31 May, we commemorated the famous naval battle, the battle of Jutland, with events in Orkney, and then one month later, on 1 July, we remembered the battle of the Somme with national events in France, London and Manchester. Overnight vigils were held at Westminster Abbey and in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and replicated in local communities across the UK.

Before I go on, I would like to acknowledge the huge support of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who has shaped and steered this centenary programme. He is a hugely valued colleague, as well as being my parliamentary neighbour. I should also like to take this opportunity to congratulate him on his election to the chairmanship of the Northern Ireland Select Committee. If he brings to that role the integrity, wisdom and hard work that he has brought to this project, the House will be very well served. In addition,

I would like to thank the members of the Secretary of State's first world war centenary advisory group, who have provided vital advice and guided my Department through the programme every step of the way. I was tempted to name all of them, but there are just too many. However, I want to put on record the Government's gratitude for their work. In just over two weeks' time we will deliver our next commemorative event. Officially known as the third battle of Ypres, Passchendaele is one of the most famous battles of the first world war.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I, too, want to add my commendation to the police officers who are with us today. The South Wales Borderers and the 2nd Battalion the Monmouthshire Regiment showed incredible heroism and made great sacrifices at Passchendaele. Both included members from my constituency. Soldiers were also lost in the days leading up to the battle. The 2nd Battalion the Monmouthshire Regiment moved up to the forward line on 29 July in preparation for the battle on 31 July. As we entirely appropriately remember those who gave so much in the battle, can we also remember those whose lives were lost, perhaps through wounds, in the days before?

John Glen: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that contribution. He makes a wise point with his customary eloquence, and I am sure it will be echoed across the House.

The battle was infamous not only for the terrible conditions but for the sheer scale of the losses. In the region of 250,000 allied soldiers and around the same number of German soldiers, a total of some 500,000 men from both sides, were wounded, killed or missing. Those are quite frankly unbelievable numbers. Fought between 31 July and 10 November 1917, the battle saw the British Army attempt to break out of the notorious Ypres Salient and put intolerable pressure on the German defences. Troops from across Britain and Ireland took part, along with significant numbers from today's Commonwealth, particularly from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Allied air forces played an important role, providing vital reconnaissance for the ground forces and fighting deadly dogfights with their German counterparts in the skies above the trenches. The battle was conceived, in part, as a means of influencing the struggle against German submarines, and the Royal Naval Division served on Passchendaele's battlefield alongside other soldiers. Many others contributed during the battle and in the fighting around Ypres during the conflict, including servicemen from India and the West Indies, labourers from China and, of course, the nurses and medical staff who worked behind the lines to treat the wounded.

For all those who fought in that small corner of Flanders in the late summer and autumn of 1917, including those in the Belgian, French and German armies, it would prove to be one of the most gruelling experiences of the conflict. Much of the first world war's enduring photography, poetry and artwork was inspired by the desolate landscape, which became a featureless quagmire over the course of the battle. After periods of intense rain, the mud became so bad that men and animals could be swallowed up in the swamp. Images, such as the photography of Frank Hurley or the evocative paintings of Paul Nash, are a harrowing reflection of the utter devastation that was wrought.

[*John Glen*]

Many families, villages and towns were touched by the fighting. In Wales, the battle is partly remembered for the loss of the renowned poet Ellis Evans—better known by his bardic name Hedd Wyn—who died on Pilckem Ridge on the opening day of the battle.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I apologise to the Minister because I have to be briefly absent for part of the debate, but I will return at the earliest opportunity. I know that props are not always welcome in the Chamber, but in the light of what he said about photographs, may I share with him a pair of photographs? They show Passchendaele village in June 1917 and in December 1917, and it is possible even from a distance to see how entirely the landscape was obliterated by the bombardment.

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his pertinent intervention, which the whole House will welcome.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The Minister is right that the whole House will welcome the right hon. Gentleman's illustration, but the House will note that there is a good reason why we do not use props. I did not stop the right hon. Gentleman in this exceptional circumstance, because he showed us the photographs with the very best of intentions. I am not quite sure how *Hansard* will record the pictures, but the Minister is right to note the right hon. Gentleman's point.

John Glen: That day also saw the death of the Irish poet Francis Ledwidge. It is important to remember that many of those who fought at Passchendaele were conscripts and that the war had already led to huge changes around these islands. Women were already playing a vital role in the war effort, particularly in the production of munition for the artillery, which was so critical to the outcome of the fighting. For many of us, Passchendaele has come to epitomise the horrors of trench warfare on the western front.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I think my hon. Friend knows what I am about to say, but does he recall that, through him and the Wiltshire Regiment, I presented the city of Salisbury with a bugle that was used by the 1st Wiltshire Regiment? I understand that it is now in the museum as a recognition and a memory of the brave people who fought in that wonderful battle.

John Glen: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding me and the House of that kind gift. It represents a whole plethora of gifts and memories concerning the first and second world wars that many Members of this House and many of constituents have in their families. It is important that we put those exhibits out there so that the next generation can fully grasp what happened during this period of our history.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I rise because of the description of Passchendaele as a “wonderful battle.” For many who were there, including my father, it was a terrible tragedy that resulted from the misjudgment of generals and others. We cannot look at it without remembering that many of those who lost their lives—they did not give their lives—were told that if they went there, they would stop the “Huns” bayoneting

Belgian babies. They went there as a result of persuasion and propaganda, and we must remember that if we are going to learn the proper lessons of war and the immense and wasteful loss of human life.

John Glen: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. Every Member will have a different emphasis and interpretation of events, and I hope that the debate will give everyone an opportunity to reflect in our own way on the events of 100 years ago.

Three commemorative events will be held in Belgium on 30 and 31 July 2017 at iconic locations where soldiers fought, survived, died and are commemorated. On Sunday 30 July, we will begin with the traditional last post ceremony at the Menin Gate in Ypres. It is one of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's most iconic memorials. It was built to honour all of those who fought around Ypres during the first world war and also bears the names of more than 54,000 individuals who died while serving with the forces of Britain, Australia, Canada, India and South Africa but for whom there is no known grave. Designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, it is a remarkable monument, and a fitting place to start our proceedings. The last post ceremony has been held there at 20:00 hours every evening since the unveiling of the memorial in 1927—with the exception of the second world war, when the ceremony was held at Brookwood military cemetery near Woking. It is organised by the Last Post Association and its buglers have performed the ceremony since its origin.

The ceremony will commemorate the UK's shared history with Belgium. A UK military band and the National Youth Choir of Scotland will perform, and wreaths will be laid by representatives of some 23 nations who fought on the Ypres Salient during the war. Two hundred invited guests will attend, as well as 200 descendants who were successful in a public ballot and whose ancestors are named on the Menin Gate. After the ceremony, events will be held outside the Cloth Hall in Ypres' Market Square to an estimated audience of around 6,000 members of the public, plus our invited guests. We will creatively tell the story of the war in the Ypres Salient from 1914, with a particular focus on the third battle of Ypres of 1917. Projecting on the Cloth Hall, we will use a range of contemporary digital techniques to bring history to life. Projections will enable the use of a broad range of visual media from photographic and film archive to animation. The projections will be supported by live readings and poetry and musical performances, including an orchestra and choir. The event will add a distinctive, engaging and contemporary element to the centenary programme that will help us to reach a wider and, I hope, younger audience, which is a key objective of the commemorations.

On Monday 31 July, exactly 100 years since the battle began, a national commemorative event will be held at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Tyne Cot cemetery near Zonnebeke. In terms of burials, it is the largest CWGC cemetery in the world, being the final resting place of almost 12,000 Commonwealth servicemen, of whom more than 8,300 remain unidentified.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend has mentioned the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site at Ypres, and he mentions another now. Will he join me in paying tribute to all those, not just in north-western European but across the world, who maintain our

Commonwealth war grave sites with such dignity and who so brilliantly maintain the memory of those who died in service to their country?

John Glen: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, as I was just about to do that. He is right to mention their enormous contribution over the last 100 years.

Tyne Cot is the final resting place of almost 12,000 Commonwealth servicemen, of whom more than 8,300 remain unidentified—among them four German soldiers. At the heart of the cemetery is the Tyne Cot blockhouse, a formidable German fortification captured during the fighting and then used as a medical post. After the war, remains were brought to Tyne Cot from across the surrounding battlefields, but most of those buried there are thought to have died during the third battle of Ypres.

When the Menin Gate was constructed, its walls proved insufficient to bear the names of all the missing of the Ypres Salient, so a memorial wall at Tyne Cot bears the names of nearly 35,000 men who were killed after 16 August 1917 and whose graves are not known.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister troubled, as I am, by the inherent tension within the nation's commemorative programme for the first world war between the need to remember the sacrifice of previous generations and the desire to instil in current generations the need for patriotism and potential sacrifice in defence of our values? The dreadful, needless mass loss of life in the first world war was perhaps different from the second world war.

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman makes a typically thoughtful representation of the challenge in getting these commemorations right. I hope he will recognise that a lot of thought and work has gone into trying to get that balance right. I hope we will begin to understand how it is being balanced when we hear from some of my colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison).

I will reflect, as I said I would, on the CWGC, which commemorates 54,000 of the missing on the Menin Gate and a further 35,000 on the memorial wall at Tyne Cot. When the names on other nearby memorials are added, the total comes to some 100,000 soldiers who have no known grave, numbers that are unimaginable in modern-day warfare.

Following the ballot for free tickets launched in January, I am delighted that around 3,900 descendants will attend the event at Tyne Cot. The content and staging of the event will evoke, I hope, a strong sense of place, making full use of the poignancy and historic significance of the cemetery. There will be readings by military personnel and descendants, musical performances by UK military bands, a choir and solo performances, and a formal act of remembrance. Readings of soldiers' recollections, letters and diaries, as well as poetry, will tell the story of the third battle of Ypres and the experiences of men who fought there. Content will reflect the contribution of men from across the UK and Ireland, as well as from the Commonwealth.

In addition, from 29 to 31 July, the Passchendaele centenary exhibition will be held at Passchendaele Memorial Park in Zonnebeke. We have been working with Memorial Museum Passchendaele, and the exhibition will include

contributions from a range of UK and Belgian museums and organisations. There will be artefacts, exhibition-style display boards and panels, living history groups and areas for historical talks and musical performances in open-air and covered areas. Memorial Museum Passchendaele will also have an exhibition entitled "Passchendaele, landscape at war," which will be open to visitors.

I thank and acknowledge the help and support given to us by all the local organisations and local communities in and around Ypres and Zonnebeke during the planning stages over the last year. Their support has been invaluable, and my thanks go particularly to the mayors of Ypres and Zonnebeke, who have led that contribution.

We have also had a huge amount of support from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which is celebrating its own centenary this year. This organisation is one of our key partners, and it does outstanding work in ensuring that 1.7 million people who died in the two world wars will never be forgotten. The CWGC cares for cemeteries and memorials at 23,000 locations in 154 countries and territories across the globe, making sure that our war dead are honoured with dignity. The CWGC recently launched a new scheme for interns who have been welcoming and guiding visitors at major cemeteries and memorials this summer, including at Tyne Cot. Also, the Ministry of Defence is a key partner that is contributing military assets to these events. I am delighted, too, that the BBC will be broadcasting the events on both Sunday night and Monday.

Our key themes across the entire first world war centenary programme are remembrance, youth and education. On youth and education, I am pleased that the National Youth Choir of Scotland will perform at all three commemorative events and that around 100 graduates of the National Citizen Service, aged 16 to 19, will be part of the delivery team at the commemorations. The graduates have undergone an educational programme on the first world war in readiness for their roles in Belgium.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful for what the Minister is presenting to the House. I completely agree that it is only right and fitting that we should commemorate the loss of life at Passchendaele. Will he talk about the role of the medical profession after Passchendaele and the trench warfare of the first world war? We are commemorating those who lost their lives, but many of those who came home suffered from shellshock, and so many advances in psychiatry were made by dealing with that on the frontline and with the impact on families. Will that play any part in the commemoration of those who survived?

John Glen: Given our understanding of many of the impacts of war, certainly psychologically, we will have those things in mind as we remember the events of Passchendaele, but it is very difficult to go back and reinterpret events as they were at the time and as they were experienced at the time. The hon. Gentleman makes a perceptive and worthwhile point.

The Royal British Legion's National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire is also hosting a special service on 31 July, which will include a broadcast on large screens of our national event at Tyne Cot. Members on both sides of the House are encouraged to attend this free event, if they can. They should encourage their constituents to attend, too.

[*John Glen*]

More Victoria Crosses were won on the first day of the battle of Passchendaele than on any other single day of battle in the first world war, and 61 VCs were awarded during the campaign as a whole. All 61 recipients will be honoured with a commemorative paving stone in the town of their birth on the anniversary of the action for which the Victoria Cross was awarded. The commemorative paving stone initiative forms part of the Government's first world war centenary programme. In the case of those men born overseas, their commemorative paving stones have been placed at the National Memorial Arboretum.

Passchendaele also saw Captain Noel Chavasse, a medical officer, receive his second Victoria Cross. He was wounded on the first evening of Passchendaele but, under heavy fire and in appalling weather, he continued to search no man's land to attend to the wounded. On 2 August, while he was taking a rest, his first aid post was struck by a shell. Although he had at least six injuries, he managed to crawl away and was picked up and taken to the 32nd casualty clearing station, Brandhoek, where he died on 4 August 1917.

We are also supporting Passchendaele at Home in partnership with the Big Ideas Company. There are over 400 graves in the UK that are very likely to belong to servicemen injured at the battle of Passchendaele who died of their wounds afterwards. The project will work with schools and communities across the country to identify graves in their area and to find out more about the brave men who fought at Passchendaele.

As the House has heard, and I hope Members agree, these commemorative events to mark the battle of Passchendaele will be both educational and poignant, and they will help us to reflect on this terrible war and battle 100 years ago.

1.10 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I thank the Minister for his speech and, as this is my first opportunity to do so, may I welcome him to his new post? Although they have already left, may I, on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, add our gratitude and thanks to Mr Nicholls and Mr Wright, the two police officers who helped to apprehend the killer of our beloved late colleague Jo Cox, whose plaque is now here behind me on Opposition side of the House? It is rightly standing with all the plaques of hon. Members who gave their lives on behalf of the country in previous conflicts, including the first world war.

Across this House, we are immensely grateful for the opportunity to commemorate Passchendaele, the third battle of Ypres, and the chance to speak of our military history, our armed forces communities, and the sacrifices that were made, and are still made, on our behalf. I should also like to take the opportunity, on behalf of the official Opposition, to pay tribute to those who have served in our armed forces and those who continue to serve. We are all grateful for their courage, as they serve to keep us safe.

As we have heard, the battle of Passchendaele stretched from July to November 1917, as the allied forces and the German empire battled for control of the ridges around Ypres on the western front. It was the first

major British offensive on the Ypres Salient. The stalemate lasted for months, marked by the battles within the battles of Menin Road Bridge, Polygon Wood, and Broodseinde. As has been said, the casualties on both sides are difficult to calculate, but there were well over half a million, and yet the village of Passchendaele itself was only 5 miles away from the starting point of the allied forces' action.

The battle is notorious, not only for the number of casualties, but for the conditions in which it was fought. The first few days of the offensive were marked by the heaviest rainfall in 30 years, turning the field into a quagmire which trapped soldiers and horses, and immobilised weaponry. A century on, in the safety and grandeur of this place, it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the mud, the blood and the horror, and the sheer scale of the losses of Passchendaele—but that is why it is absolutely right that we remember.

There were 325,000 allied casualties, a fact that is difficult to comprehend, as is their bravery, valour, and sacrifice. In the minds of many, Passchendaele has come to epitomise the senselessness of war. So these moments of commemoration are important, and I would like to join the Minister in thanking all of those involved: the Imperial War Museum; the BBC; the Royal British Legion; the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; and all the other organisations, including those he mentioned, that work so hard to ensure that we do not forget. We are fortunate at the moment to have an exhibition in the Palace, in Westminster Hall, about Parliament and the first world war, which I encourage all hon. Members to visit if they have not already done so.

The scale of the great war was such that, today, most cities, towns, and villages have a memorial that lists the names of the local people who died while fighting for Britain in that war. Members will not be surprised to hear me, as a Welsh MP, observe that the sacrifices made in the first world war continue to resonate in Wales, despite the passage of 100 years. The first significant losses of Welsh life came during October and November of 1914. The Germans rushed for Belgian seaports, but were repelled by units of the Welch Regiment and the South Wales Borderers, who suffered many casualties. The Minister made reference to the fact that of all the events of that war, Passchendaele, in particular, is a part of Welsh cultural memory: every village in Wales was affected; 20,000 first-language Welsh-speaking soldiers alone were killed; the soldiers of the Welch Regiment, South Wales Borderers and Royal Welsh Fusiliers all fought alongside each other in the 38th Division; and further, the Welsh Guards fought at this, the third battle of Ypres. The 38th Division was devised by David Lloyd George, who went on to become Prime Minister, whose statue flanks the entrance to this Chamber and who was himself a first language Welsh speaker. The division first shipped to France in 1915 and suffered heavy casualties in the Somme. By 1917, it had come to be seen as an elite division, particularly following the battle of Pilckem Ridge at the beginning of the third battle of Ypres. The De Sportsman cafe at Langemark, not far from Ypres, has been dedicated by the owner, Marc Dacaestecker, to the many Welsh soldiers who died in the area in 1917. The red dragon on a black background worn by the 38th Division is the inspiration for the shoulder flash worn by the Royal Welsh today, a testament to the cultural significance of the 38th Division.

It is for reasons such as this that sacrifice and public service are commemorated today right across the UK, but particularly by the armed forces community in Wales in relation to Passchendaele. When contemplating casualties on such a huge scale, we often turn to individual stories in remembrance, as the Minister did and as I would like to do. As the Minister said, it is 100 years since Passchendaele, and it is also a 100 years since Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu, the Eisteddfod of the Black Chair. Some hon. Members will know that the Eisteddfod is the annual Welsh-language cultural festival where people compete at singing, dancing, and reciting poetry. It is held every summer; this year's will be held in only a few weeks' time, and I am pleased to say that next year's will be a free event in the capital city of Cardiff, where my constituency lies.

In 1916, some people called for the Eisteddfod to be cancelled, as they did not think it would be appropriate to spend time singing while men were fighting and dying on their behalf in the trenches. But David Lloyd George insisted. He said:

“It is true that there are thousands of gallant men falling in the fight—let us sing of their heroism... Let us sing of our land that gave birth to so many heroes”.

So in 1916, the Eisteddfod went on. The following year, in 1917, as the battle of Passchendaele wore on, the Eisteddfod was directly touched by the tragedy of war. Ellis Humphrey Evans, under the now-famous pseudonym, Hedd Wyn, was judged as the winner of the Chair, the Eisteddfod's highest honour, granted to the best poet writing in traditional strict meter, known as cynghanedd. However, when the winner's pseudonym was called in the traditional dramatic ceremony at the Eisteddfod, no one stood up in the audience to reveal themselves as the triumphant poet. It was then announced that the winning bard had been killed in battle six weeks prior. Hedd Wyn had been one of 4,000 men killed on a single morning when the Royal Welsh Fusiliers went over the top near Passchendaele, in the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. The poet from Trawsfynydd has become the subject of poems and history lessons in classrooms across Wales, and even of an Oscar-nominated feature film. The poignant story of Hedd Wyn captured the mourning of a nation.

So in a way it is doubly appropriate that the Front-Bench lead in this debate today is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, because in the greatest perils, it is poetry, songs and the arts that often keep people going, and miraculously, even though we would not want this to happen, manage to turn the horrors of war into the beauty of artistic inspiration.

The war effort in the UK was made up of not only the men who went to fight, but the surgeons and nurses on the battlefields. At home, women became the backbone of industry. Here, I would like to mention my own constituency. In 1917, the Women's Land Army formed and 20,000 women across the UK enlisted. Green Farm, in the Ely area of my Cardiff West constituency, is now a housing estate, which was built to deliver homes “fit for heroes” after the great war. As a farm, it was run predominantly by female farm hands during the war. One of the workers, Agnes Greatorex, left domestic service to work on the farm. She said:

“Every morning, we would get up at five o'clock and milk a hundred cows. We would then take the milk to Glan Ely Hospital.”

I am proud—I am sure that we are all proud—of the efforts of Agnes and of so many women across the country. Of course, Agnes is part of Cardiff West's history, but I am both proud of and humbled by the sacrifices that we still see from our armed forces communities across the UK today.

The UK armed forces continue to protect us. They are currently involved in more than 30 operations in over 20 countries. Abroad, our forces continue to work in Afghanistan, in non-combat roles. They support the EU and UN in peacekeeping missions in South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali. They are part of NATO's forces in eastern Europe, and, as we heard earlier today in the House, are responding to the continuing threat posed by Daesh.

At home, they support responses to terrorist incidents, protect our aerospace, and are supported by the entire armed forces community of families, reservists, veterans, and cadets. During this debate to commemorate the sacrifices made in Passchendaele, we should also remember the sacrifices that have been made, and are still being made, every year since then by the brave men and women of the UK armed forces.

To close, I turn to the words of Hedd Wyn's “Rhyfel”, which means war. I will read it in Welsh and then in the English translation.

Mae'r hen delynau genid gynt,
Yng nghrog ar gangau'r helyg draw,
A gwaedd y bechgyn lond y gwynt,
A'u gwaed yn gymysg efo'r glaw.
The harps to which we sang, are hung
On willow boughs, and their refrain
Drowned by the anguish of the young
Whose blood is mingled with the rain.

1.22 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): May I begin by thanking the Minister for outlining the various ceremonies that are to take place over the next two or three months to commemorate the battle of Passchendaele? I also thank the spokesman for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), for talking about the wider impact of the war, which we are also commemorating.

It seems to me that, at times, this commemoration is a bit like the first world war in that, year by year, we remember another campaign, another battle. I wanted to speak in this debate for a number of reasons. I am so old that I interviewed dozens of first world war survivors in the 1970s for a writing project—I published two or three books. I have a deep, connected memory of the first world war, as my grandfather served in it. As a member of the Prime Minister's advisory panel on the first world war, I am also conscious of the fact that we need to get the balance right—this point was made in an intervention on the Minister—between commemoration and not glorifying war. How do we bring the war to young people? I have a personal connection as I can remember talking to survivors of Passchendaele, but for my son, who is 26, the battle of Passchendaele is as far away from him as the battle of Waterloo.

Secondly, why are we remembering Passchendaele? Is it just because we have got into the habit of putting hooks on our commemoration? In other words, it was obvious that, in 2014, it was going to be the battle of

[*Mr Keith Simpson*]

Mons. We glided through 2015, but there was of course Gallipoli, which was very, very important to the Australians and the New Zealanders. The great irony there is that the Australians and New Zealanders played a far more important and significant role as part of the British Armies in Belgium and France in '16, '17 and '18 and, indeed, suffered far worse casualties. Now, in 2017, we are largely, but not wholly, commemorating Passchendaele. Next year, we will end up commemorating the great German Spring offensive, which nearly broke the allied line; the Hundred Days offensive, which was the more mobile campaign; and then the collapse of the Germans in October and November 1918. That is it—the end of the first world war, but of course it was not.

As the Minister pointed out, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission celebrates its centenary this year. It was the work of a remarkable man, Fabian Ware, who served with an ambulance unit—he was too old to serve in a frontline unit—in 1914. He was struck by the extent of the casualties and what was going to happen to them. Through the adjutant general, one of the chief of staff officers in the British Armies' general headquarters, he began to collect bodies together—he began some form of formalisation. In 1917, the Imperial War Graves Commission was established. Its work really began after the Armistice in 1918. As the Minister pointed out, Tyne Cot—named after a reference on a map—outside Passchendaele, became the largest cemetery for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Nearly 50,000 men are commemorated there, the majority of whom have no grave.

That brings me on to my next point, which is that, for younger people, Passchendaele is about the sheer extent of casualties. I suspect that it is also associated in their mind not only with poetry and literature, some of which we have heard, but with film and photographs. The great thing about the first world war—if there is a great thing—is that we can actually see it. There is cine film, which is slightly more difficult, and a raft of photographs, many of which were taken on the frontline. It was against King's regulations for servicemen to take cameras onto the frontline. Most of them ignored that, and sent their photographs back home, which has given us a graphic display of what happened.

I talk to children and young people about the war. They say to me, "Another three or four years and I would have been old enough to have fought in the war. How did those people endure that? What did the Government do to force them to fight in the British Armies in the first world war?" It comes as quite a surprise to them when I say that there was no conscription until 1916-17 and that the majority of the servicemen were volunteers—either Kitchener volunteers or they were in the territorial army. There was a pretty dramatic and drastic military discipline code—we know, for example, that dozens of British servicemen were executed in the first world war, some for cowardice and some for murder. What I was struck by all those years ago when I talked to veterans and read their diaries and letters—it was clear that many of them were appalled by the death of their friends and the suffering—was that they volunteered partly out of a local interest. Many of them served with their friends, volunteering to serve in pals battalions or to serve alongside men from the same village or even the

same streets. It was a Victorian concept of duty. Of course one of the most important stimulants and determinants in battle, which I was always told when teaching at Sandhurst by men who had done this, is small-group loyalty. They were doing it not for their battalion, but for the people in their section—I am talking about half a dozen people.

We must remember that Passchendaele, as the Minister and the shadow Minister pointed out, was not a one-day battle. It was a series of campaigns from the end of July right through until 10 November and was only one part of the work of the British Armies in Belgium and France in 1917.

The next point I want briefly to touch on is that one question that is asked, not just by young people but by people who are interested in the first world war, is why the generals were so stupid—the point made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). I have never been particularly in that camp; what I try to remember is that they came from a limited background and had limited experience and perception of war. We also need to bear in mind that the British expeditionary force of 1914—mainly regular and reservist, with a few TA—was about 150,000 men. Douglas Haig commanded a tiny part of that. In 1917, the British Armies in France were roughly 1.3 million men—an enormous expansion in war. Many were not soldiers; they were on the logistics or support side. To use a modern academic term, the learning curve required to recruit, train, deploy and fight these armies was enormous.

That was the experience not just in Britain but in Belgium, France, Germany and Russia, and I have to say that bearing in mind the extent of the casualties at Passchendaele—we are talking about perhaps 500,000 to 600,000 men, give or take 10,000, and that sounds appallingly inaccurate—we need to think about this in terms of the casualties of the second world war. To give just one example, historians now tell us that the average British infantry battalion in Normandy had more casualties than its equivalent in France in 1917. Passchendaele was unique in one sense, but there is a commonality in major war on a vast scale.

Then there is the question of the coalition Prime Minister mentioned by the Opposition spokesman, David Lloyd George, and what became the battle of the memoirs—Involving Lloyd George, Churchill and the politicians on one side and the generals on the other—about who was responsible for the casualties and whether there was an alternative. Lloyd George wanted, for very good reasons, to avoid engaging the German enemy in the main theatre of operations, the western front. He was always looking for a way to knock the props out from under Germany. On the whole, the generals were against that. As far as they were concerned, the main battle was in Belgium and France, where we were a subordinate and then an equal partner of the French. There is no doubt in my mind that Lloyd George had, in theory, the power to have halted the campaign in third Ypres after the first month, when General Gough's army ground to a halt in the foulest of weather. He had that power—except he did not, because he felt weak up against Douglas Haig. Haig had the press on his side, and they were on his side until the end.

The debate is still going on today among historians about whether there was an alternative. There probably was not, but we did not have in place the methods and

organisation to have proper debates about such matters during the first world war. That was the big lesson that Churchill learned. Churchill, of course, left the Government after Gallipoli, and went and served in France before Lloyd George reluctantly brought him back as Minister of Munitions. When Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940, the one lesson he had learned from the first world war was that the Prime Minister pretty much had to have total power. He therefore made himself Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, but he also sought to have a continuous day-by-day debate with the chiefs of staff over the full range of strategy and to use Government Committees to run the war. Churchill was in many respects a dictator, but almost without exception he never overruled the chiefs of staff.

Lloyd George did not have that ability. Not only did the Navy not talk to the Army, but Lloyd George had great difficulty pinning down the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Wully Robertson, the only man to go from working-class private to head of the Army and a field marshal. His contempt for Lloyd George was such that at one meeting he walked out; he just decided he was not going to continue the debate. These are the kinds of things with which I try to get young people engaged—issues that are still alive today.

My final point concerns the sorrow and pity of war. Putting aside the plans and personalities of the senior officers, the battle of Passchendaele was defined by two things as much as anything. The sheer weight of artillery firepower was on such a scale that it totally dwarfed anything that had taken place at the battle of the Somme. We are talking about an ability to bring down box artillery firepower in very small areas, and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has illegally shown us photographs of what Passchendaele looked like. The second element was the two periods of atrocious weather—absolute downpours of rain that ground everything to a halt. That is a phenomenon that we cannot deal with today.

If Members want to think about the impact of firepower, they should read the book “We Were Warriors” by our colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). It is based on his three tours of operation in Afghanistan as a Royal Artillery officer attached to the Royal Marines. Members can see in that book that despite all the technology we now have—the firepower and the Cobra and Apache helicopters—it is still difficult, and there is an overwhelming desire not to kill or injure civilians.

I welcome this commemorative debate and I know that colleagues on both sides of the House will contribute to it. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to read out two short contemporaneous accounts that combine the shellfire and the strain on soldiers. The first is from Britain and Private Bert Ferns of 2nd/6th Lancashire Fusiliers, describing an attack in October 1917—in other words, halfway through the Passchendaele campaign. He said that Mr Kay—obviously a platoon officer—

“came up and said ‘Come on lads, it’s our turn,’ and we just walked round the corner of the pillbox and up the hill. The Germans didn’t have much to fear from me that morning—there was no fire in my belly—no nothing. I staggered up the hill and...froze and became very frightened because a big shell had just burst and blown a group of lads to bits; there were bits of men all over the place, a terrible sight, men just blown to nothing. I just stood there. It was still and misty, and I could taste their

blood in the air. I couldn’t move. I stood there staring. Then an officer came across and shouted we were too far left and must go half right. I would have probably been dead but for him jolting me out of it. These men had just been killed and we just had to wade through them to get on. That’s one thing I’ll never forget, what I saw and what I smelt.”

The second short account is from the other side of the hill, as Basil Liddell Hart would have said, and a letter from an unknown German officer dated 20 September 1917:

“Dear Mother,

On the morning of the 18th, the dug-out, containing seventeen men, was shot to pieces over our heads. I am the only one who withstood the maddening bombardment of three days and still survives. You cannot imagine the frightful mental torments I have undergone in those few hours. After crawling out through the bleeding remnants of my comrades and the smoke and debris, and wandering and fleeing in the midst of the raging artillery fire in search of refuge, I am now awaiting death at any moment.

You do not know what Flanders means. Flanders means endless endurance. Flanders means blood and scraps of human bodies. Flanders means heroic courage and faithfulness, even unto death.

Your Otto.”

I do not know whether he survived.

1.39 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), who made an incredibly forensic, heartfelt and vivid speech—his two read-outs at the end were particularly emotional—and the House is better informed as a result of it, so I thank him most sincerely. I also thank the Minister for bringing the debate to the House, and pay tribute to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who made a very fine speech.

It is absolutely right that we commemorate Passchendaele; the word is a trigger that brings up what it meant to go through industrial warfare. The sacrifice paid then must of course never be forgotten, and we pay tribute to all the bodies mentioned by the Minister that will take part in the commemoration services this year. Commemoration is of course important. It is always important to commemorate the large-scale loss of human life, as we do this week on the 22nd anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica. We welcome the fact that the families of those lost in the battle of Passchendaele will have the opportunity to take part in these commemorations.

In Scotland, no community, and barely a family, was untouched by the carnage of Passchendaele. This tragedy highlights, as do many other tragedies, the importance of international and institutional peacebuilding and co-operation, shared values, shared interests, and working together to ensure that war does not become the norm of our time.

I turn to Glasgow, as I am sure that you will have expected me to, Madam Deputy Speaker, given that I am a Glasgow Member of Parliament. I understand that another honourable friend from Glasgow, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), may wish to catch your eye to touch on our city’s heritage and history in this respect. I would like to mention something fascinating that I came across on the website of the Scottish Football Museum, which is based in Hampden Park in my constituency. I would like to tell the House about an individual you can read more about

[*Stewart Malcolm McDonald*]

on the website, or in the museum: the former Rangers player, Jimmy Speirs. His face will front the centenary commemoration of the Scots who did not make it back from Passchendaele. On 19 August, the unveiling of the life-sized steel silhouettes in Frezenberg will feature Jimmy Speirs, one of the many Glaswegians who never made it back from Passchendaele.

In addition to the excellent archives of the Scottish Football Museum, there is the fantastic portal at Glasgow University, which mentions a number of very distinguished people; I could read out their biographies and tell hon. Members lots about their lives, but there are a small handful that I would like to inform the House of. The first is Lachlan Seymour Graham, who was born in Glasgow on 19 September 1882. His father, Duncan, was a well-known Glasgow leather manufacturer with an interest in politics and public life. He was one of the founding members of the Glasgow Liberal Club, a past president of the eighth and Broomielaw municipal wards, the director of the Glasgow Agricultural Society, and a keen cricketer and golfer.

Seymour went up to the University of Glasgow in 1900 to begin an arts degree. He took many subjects, including Latin, logic, law and moral philosophy. In his final years in arts, he discovered his strong suit: he did extremely well in political economy and James Irvine's civil law class. Perhaps it was that success that encouraged him to take up law. After graduating in 1905, he matriculated again for Scots law, and over the next few years he gradually put together a bachelor of law. He graduated for a second time in 1910. It was while he was forging his way in the legal profession that he decided to join up. Seymour took a commission as second lieutenant in the 7th Highland Light Infantry. It was at Passchendaele, the very name of which evokes so much loss—loss that hon. Members have adumbrated this afternoon—that he was fatally wounded. Lieutenant Graham died on 29 August 1917.

Again in my constituency, there was George Ernest Main, the second son of an oil refiner, George B. Main of Pollockshields on the south side of Glasgow. He was educated at Glasgow University from 1907, and prior to that at the Glasgow Academy. Despite excelling in political economy, he was not able to pass his examinations in Latin, maths or constitutional law and left without completing his degree. By the time the war had broken out, he had begun to study for the ministry at the United Free Church's Divinity Hall.

Then there is Walter Ramsay Scott, born on 28 April 1893 in Pollockshaws, which was then part of Renfrewshire and not the city of Glasgow. He was the son of Robert Scott, a cashier, and Margaret Scott, and lived at 23 Barrington Drive, Glasgow, Lanarkshire.

It can be too easy, when we discuss these types of events, to remember numbers rather than people. I have selected a small number of extraordinary Glaswegians who took part in, and paid the ultimate price at, the battle of Passchendaele. Behind all those names are not just men, distinguished in education, politics, and public and military life, but their families—the children, wives, sisters and mothers who were left behind. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) makes an important point: it is absolutely correct to remember the dead and wounded,

but what about those who supported our brave soldiers? What about the nurses, doctors, and those who were supporting people with mental health problems? They too have a rightful place in any commemoration of not just Passchendaele but any other major conflict with an enormous loss of life.

I pay tribute to the Government's efforts in this commemoration. As a Glaswegian, I am very pleased and proud that the first of the Government's first world war commemorative events was in Glasgow cathedral; there is no finer cathedral anywhere in the United Kingdom. [*Interruption.*] I hear other suggestions being made from a sedentary position. On behalf of the people of Glasgow—this will, I am sure, be reinforced by the new hon. Member for Glasgow North East—I say: we remember and salute these people, and thank their families for their sacrifice.

1.48 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In debates of this sort, we have a tradition of fine oratory and thoughtful contributions, which we have certainly had today. I was interested in the intervention of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock); he rightly raised the issue of tone, which was the first question considered at the very beginning of this commemorative period, when the Government were drawing up their plans for the four-year centenary, because really on that hinges all the rest. Commemoration and celebration are phonetically very similar, but semantically they are very different indeed, and throughout this period the Government have rightly insisted that this is commemoration, most certainly not celebration.

Earlier in this commemorative period, we had to address issues such as whether this was a just war in Augustinian terms. Was it the right thing to do, and was it worth the price? Those are two very different things.

In Augustinian terms, it was a just war. It satisfied all the preconditions for a just war, and it is as well that it was a war that was won. But who among us would have signed up to such a thing if we had known in advance what the dreadful cost of the war would have been? We are reminded of that cost every day as we arrive here, when we look at our own war memorial at the end of Westminster Hall. That is replicated right across the country in our war memorials, which characterise every single settlement in the British Isles. It was a cost, indeed, and one that I suspect few of us today would be prepared to countenance.

The third battle of Ypres became known as Passchendaele. The word evokes such powerful sentiment, despite the fact that it was the part of the campaign that was right at the very tail end of the engagement. The battle began relatively well. It was preceded by Messines, of which we were reminded last week as we commemorated the death of a former Member of Parliament, Major Willie Redmond, who died at 56—think of that—at that particular battle. He was a truly great man, and his death reminds us of the great waste of life and lost opportunity.

In the Minister's excellent opening speech, he rightly mentioned Francis Ledwidge, the so-called poet of the blackbirds, and Hedd Wyn, the bard of the black chair, who died at Pilckem Ridge. The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench, was quite right to point out

that this cultural loss of wonderful creative men really brings home what a wasteful period in our history this war was. Just think of what the world might have been had those men lived to become fathers, grandfathers, doctors, poets and artists—to achieve their full potential. It is almost unimaginable. Yet, that is where we are left as a result of this terrible war. According to A.J.P. Taylor, third Ypres was

“the blindest slaughter of a blind war.”

We have heard that close on a quarter of a million British and British empire troops were either killed or injured between 31 July and 12 November; it was a similar number on the German side.

Basil Liddell Hart was writing in the 1930s, when he said that Passchendaele was synonymous with military failure and that it was “black-bordered” in the annals of the British Army. He had some experience of serving in the trenches, and he wrote his great works on the subject between 1930 and 1934. I am particularly moved by the accounts of historians of that time because they could remember; it was pretty much fresh in their memory. As Hilary Mantel has pointed out so recently in her Reith lectures, the difficulty with history is that it seems to change all the time. As generations go by, they seem to reinterpret history all the time. Well, Liddell Hart was reporting more or less in near time with his own recollections. I hope my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) would agree that, when examining the historical record, we need to have a particular mind to those who were writing very close to the great war. They were there and had seen it with their own eyes. They were not seeing it through the fog of a century or so, as we now are.

According to Liddell Hart, Lieutenant General Sir Launcelot Kiggell, when driving up to the front line in his staff car, is meant to have said, “Good God, did we really send men to fight in that?” Nick Lloyd’s book “Passchendaele: A New History” was published this year, and his more contemporary account suggests that that was apocryphal. That may be the case, but it certainly served the narrative that this was a war all about chateau generals sending other men’s sons to die in terrible circumstances—a narrative that prevailed in the 1960s when we were commemorating the 50th anniversary of the conflict, and which has only recently been corrected.

Public appetite for this material appears to be pretty much insatiable. The Government have been surprised by the level of interest that the centenary has provoked. We have never done this sort of thing before, so we had no real idea at the beginning how much interest there would be in the material and, frankly, how sustainable it would be. Well, the public have surpassed all our expectations, as they are proving to be incredibly receptive. Evidence suggests that one of the legacies of this centenary period will be a greatly improved level of understanding of this seminal period in our recent history. All the evidence suggests that people better understand the circumstances that led up to the great war, and the conduct of that war. As we get further into the centenary, the right questions are being asked. People are asking, “What does this actually mean?” and “How does it impact on how we live today?” The big question, of course, is “How on earth do we prevent it from ever happening again?”

When we come to examine all this investment in time and effort over the four years, we should also look at the diplomatic deliverables. The value of commemorating

shared history has really struck me. Some of this is actually quite uncomfortable, and it can be uncomfortable in surprising places. Our relationship, for example, with what is now the Republic of Ireland—more than our relationship with Germany—has been advanced quite significantly over this period. When we hear people in the Republic of Ireland talking about the service of their forebears in the uniform of George V, we know that something has changed. They would not have talked openly about that or displayed those campaign medals a generation ago. That is truly remarkable, despite the fact that a lot of this history is painful for many people, so the centenary underscores the importance of commemorating history, warts and all, and ensuring that at no point do we attempt to airbrush or finesse it.

Throughout the four years, we have focused on young people for obvious reasons. It was people of their age who, 100 years ago, were right at the forefront of all the action. It is salutary to stand at a place such as Tyne Cot and watch the reaction of young people arriving on bus tours. These are typically cynical youths, but not when looking around a place such as Tyne Cot. Just look at their faces; the penny has dropped, because they are looking at row on row of headstones above the remains of people their own age. One of the most powerful things we have done as part of the battlefield tours is to ensure, wherever we possibly can, the presence of a contemporary serviceman, so that the connection can be made. One benefit from initiatives of that sort is better understanding on the part of those young people who, with the contraction of our armed forces these days, perhaps do not have the first-hand connection with the armed forces that our generation might have had. That is an incredibly powerful thing, which brings the events alive to today’s young men and women.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I pay tribute—I am sure, on behalf of the whole House—to all the work that my hon. Friend has done personally to help to commemorate the first world war. He has put in a tremendous amount of time and effort, and it is right to acknowledge that today. He was talking about young people. I am sure he would agree that it is vital that young people of today’s generation are able to learn about the tremendous sacrifice that was made so that they could live in a free country. Therefore, will he join me in commending FitzWimarc School, Sweyne Park School and Beauchamps High School in my constituency for all the work they have done to organise tours so that their young people can go to the battlefronts of the first world war, and learn about the importance of sacrifice?

Dr Murison: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The thing that impresses one most of all about this commemorative period is the extraordinary amount of work that has been done right across the country—some of it sponsored and assisted by the Government, some of it not, and some of it quite spontaneous in its evolution. Together, that forms a wonderful patchwork of commemorative activity, and it just shows the passion the public have for commemorating this period in our history. That suggests to me that there will, indeed, be a very rich legacy when we come towards the end of our four years.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for the extraordinary work he has done to ensure that this commemoration period

[*Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan*]

is given as wide a reach as it can be. Last year, he encouraged me to look at the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers—the young men from my constituency who went out to fight in the first world war. Those boys and young men were the same age as my son is now, which brings this home very bluntly to me. Last November, I went out to northern Italy to lay a wreath at the war graves at Tezze, in northern Italy. By chance, a group of Italian students of 17 and 18 was visiting. They had never been in the cemetery before, but they saw a woman in a red coat with a wreath, and they were curious, so they came over. Their teacher, who spoke perfect English, asked me to explain why I was there and why British soldiers had been fighting in their country. These children had had very little education about the first world war, because the fascist regime altered the way history was taught in Italy. To a young man and young woman, they were absolutely transfixed. They were enormously appreciative of, and slightly overwhelmed by, the fact that young men had come from far away—in this case, from Berwick in Northumberland—to fight for freedom. I commend my hon. Friend for the efforts he has made, which have given us the opportunity to share these things with those children across the water.

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and she is absolutely right. That gives me the opportunity to say that this is, of course, not just about the western front. I am pleased that she mentioned Italy. It is important, as part of this four-year commemorative period, that people do come to appreciate that the first world war was, indeed, a world war, and the Italian campaign is an important part of that.

May I also mention centenary interns while I am talking about young people? I hope this project will become an important part of our presence on what was the western front for people wishing to visit commemorative sites. The Canadians have, for a long time, had young people guiding visitors from Canada around sites on the western front that are particularly important to Canadians. It struck me that if the Canadians can do so well from a distance of 3,000 miles, we can probably do something rather similar from a distance of 200 miles. Right now, we have established the first tranche of our centenary interns, who will guide people around the principal sites for us—Tyne Cot and Thiepval—under the supervision of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. When colleagues and others visit the western front and the cemeteries and sites of importance in northern France and Belgium, I hope they will look out for the very obvious orange T-shirt uniforms of our centenary interns. Those I met last week when I visited Tyne Cot were people of exceptional quality, and I am sure people will be very pleased to see them and to be guided by them around those sites.

It is remarkable that the third battle of Ypres was not only preceded by Messines—a victory that I think encouraged Hague in his dialogue with Lloyd George—but succeeded the success at Cambrai, which was remarkable for another reason, in that it introduced mechanised warfare realistically for the first time on the western front. That was the gathering note for what became a far more kinetic stage in the last 100 days of the war.

For most people in this country, what makes Passchendaele special, as it were, is the mud and blood. It was quite different from the Somme, which resulted in far more casualties. That mud was caused by rain, of course, but also by the inundation of Flanders following the barrage of artillery that completely destroyed all the dykes and engineering that held back the sea from that part of the world. Flanders is, of course, pasture land, and crops cannot be grown there, because it is far too wet. The reason it can be utilised for agricultural purposes at all is that it has an advanced system of water engineering. Bombardment means that that is completely destroyed. It was not for the first time in the first world war that the British Army knew the full consequences of the destruction of that system. The combination of heavy rainfall and the destruction of civil engineering in that area made it a complete quagmire, which gave Passchendaele its particular awfulness.

I would like to finish on a contemporary note. In two weeks' time, many of us will be privileged to attend the commemorations in Ypres and Tyne Cot. We will stand there among the row upon row of headstones, we will look at the Menin Gate, with its rank upon rank of names carved in stone, and we will be left with a sense of wonder. We will try to work out what it all means. In the context of the debate we are having about our future in Europe, one wonders perhaps what others think of us, too. There are those in Europe who say that this country is somehow less than European—that we are poor Europeans. I would just say this: it has always been the case, and it is the case now—this country was certainly demonstrating this full well 100 years ago—that there is no country in Europe that is more engaged in Europe than the United Kingdom.

I would just ask colleagues, as they look among those headstones and gaze up among those names carved in stone, to reflect on this country's contribution to European history. Whether we are Brexiteers or not—and I am a completely signed-up Brexiteer—we need to understand that we are Europeans; that is what we have always been, and that is what we will always be. We should take absolutely no nonsense from those who, for their own purposes, try to suggest that we are in some way disengaged from Europe. I am proud of our history. This country has always been there when Europe needed us—when we needed to face down the general disturber of the peace. I am confident that we will continue to do just that.

Two weeks' time will be a solemn time for our country. The media will most certainly be focused on Tyne Cot and Ypres. We will be among friends in Belgium—a country that is extraordinarily sympathetic to this country and a good friend of ours. It is important that, whenever we have the opportunity, we reinforce in the minds of our friends and neighbours in Europe our solidarity and comradeship with them. There can be no more enduring testament to that European engagement than the Menin Gate in Ypres and Tyne Cot at Zonnebeke.

2.8 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Each time we have these debates, they get nearer to the reality of the first world war. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) quoted Eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu, which is renowned in Wales as commemorating Hedd Wyn and that touching symbol he used:

“A’u gwaed yn gymysg efo’r glaw”—their blood mixed with the rain. We could see that in the imagery presented by the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) in the two poems he quoted. We must see the lesson of this terrible event from the first world war and learn from it.

There has been one visual aid this afternoon, and the picture I have here shows my father—Machine Gunner James Flynn. He was not a distinguished soldier, but one who volunteered because he was a great patriot. He had soaked up all the propaganda that was around at the time, and he went there to sort out the Hun. He went as a volunteer at the age of 15; he lied about his age. He went through the whole lot—the Somme and Passchendaele. Eventually he was captured by the Germans, to his great relief, because he was dying after being hit by a mortar; he was in a shell hole and could not get out of it. He was eternally grateful to the Germans for the rest of his life—he lived to 43—because of the care they gave him. They carried him across no man’s land after the breakthrough by the Germans in 1918 and saved his life. He went out there to kill Germans, and he came back as a great admirer of the Germans who saved his life.

I was struck by a poem that the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) quoted in a previous debate, because it illustrates the truth of the first world war. It is one brief stanza by Rudyard Kipling, who was of course a great cheerleader for the war and all patriotic causes—so much so that he managed to pull a few strings to make sure that his son, who had defective eyesight, could pass the test to get in to become a soldier and then lost his life. Rudyard Kipling had a picture of what would happen when he died and went to heaven, and was forced to see the people he had encouraged to go to war and lose their lives. He said:

“I could not dig; I dared not rob:
Therefore I lied to please the mob.
Now all my lies are proved untrue
And I must face the men I slew.
What tale shall serve me here among
Mine angry and defrauded young?”

The youth of that generation were defrauded by the senior generation of officers and politicians. Although they were not wicked people, they had all kinds of heroic delusions.

We must not see Passchendaele through the fog of a belief in a false idea of heroism: it was not like that. It rapidly became a terrible scene of slaughter where men died like cattle and lives were not counted, with 16 million deaths. What is our lesson, and have we learned it yet? I doubt if we have, because today we have heard the word “wonderful” used about that battle. What it can mean, I have no idea. There is no way that anyone can describe the first world war as anything other than a terrible, terrible mistake and a series of tragedies.

Sir William Cash: The use of the word “wonderful” in this context is about admiration for the heroism and for the courage. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murison) used the word “wonder” with regard to how we feel when we look at what happened. Today happens to be the anniversary of my own father’s death in the battle of Hill 112, shortly after Maltot, on 13 July 1944. I have personal experience of this; I know that the hon. Gentleman has referred to his father.

The word “wonderful” in this context is about admiration for the heroism and for the courage, and I am not going to resile from that.

Paul Flynn: I think it is entirely true to say that there is a nobility in the soldier’s craft and the soldier’s sacrifice, and we are grateful for that to this day. We see in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, with the humanitarian work that was done there, acts that are absolutely defensible and in which we can take a great pride. We have had a marvellous military history, and much of it showed the best of human nature. I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman on that.

But what are we learning today? We should look at what happened in this Chamber in 2006, when a decision was made to send troops into Helmand at a time when only half a dozen of our soldiers had been killed there. We had already been there for nearly six years, since 2001. We went in in the belief that not a shot would be fired. The result was that 450 of our soldiers died there. We have yet to face up to the reality of that. Was it a mistake by us? The Chilcot report came out. A year later, Lord Chilcot has had to repeat some of the lessons that he drew from it, because those lessons have been glossed over. There has been a spinning of the reality of his conclusions. That is partly because so many people in this Chamber at the time were part of a mistake in our joining the Iraq war. We could not stop the war happening, but we could have stopped Britain’s involvement in it, which would have avoided the deaths of 179 of our soldiers.

Sir William Cash: I would like to slightly pursue this point with the hon. Gentleman, because there is probably not much difference between us in terms of the sentiments that lie behind his reasons for advancing rather different arguments. I simply make the point that although the pity of war, as it was so aptly put, is a terrible thing, we have to reflect on the fact that sometimes it is necessary. Unprovoked aggression, as indeed we experienced in the second world war, does lead to our having to fight back, and that necessarily involves the cost of people’s lives, like my father and others. When defining the boundaries of this matter, we must be very careful to ensure that we do not go overboard in suggesting that somehow the whole war is in itself unacceptable, because unfortunately it is a fact of life. We do have to fight back and respect and admire the heroism of those who take part.

Paul Flynn: There really is no difference between us. I never suggested that there were not entirely justifiable wars.

We should be recalling what lessons we have learned from Passchendaele and the rest of the first world war in the decisions we take in this House now. I once had five weeks’ enforced absence from this House for saying what I am about to say, although I will say it in a rather more delicate way. I said that Ministers of all kinds were mistaken in the claim they were making to potential soldiers that they could go to Afghanistan and thereby reduce the threat of terrorism in this country. I think that was an untruth, because the only reason the Taliban were killing our soldiers in Afghanistan was that we were there. Other people had an interest in terrorism here, but there was never any interest among the Taliban. Soldiers were called on to go there for that purpose, but it was not true. I believe we are still in a position where

[*Paul Flynn*]

politicians lie and soldiers die. Unless we can be frank with them, we are going to find that a generation will reject war.

It was interesting that General Dannatt said recently—a matter of days ago—that he did not want people to believe what Chilcot was saying because it would suggest to those who had lost loved ones in Iraq that they died in vain. But sadly that is probably the truth, because we had nothing to gain, unlike in the first world war. The main result of the first world war was the second world war; it was a terrible error. We have a duty to look at the opinions of the soldiers who fought at the time. None of them is alive now. The last one who died left us a message when he said that he thought that war was legalised murder. There are many other soldiers whose lives were destroyed by that war. Lives were shortened.

I feel particular pain in the case of my own father. His life was ruined by the war, and he could never do what he called a proper man's job again. In 1935, his pension was reduced by the Government, who said that his health problems—he went out there as a perfectly fit 15-year-old—were not attributable to his war wounds but were aggravated by them. That was a cheat by the Government, and he died a short time later. We do not have a record of treating our soldiers with gratitude, and that remains the case. The essence of this debate is that we should remember the truth of the first world war. We should never again repeat the old lie that it is sweet and decorous to die for the country. That is not true. It is an old lie to which, sadly, new people would like to give new credence.

2.20 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I want to talk about the situation 100 years ago. At that time, one quarter of the vessels crossing the Atlantic were being sunk by U-boats coming from the Belgian coast. The Navy had warned the Government that unless something was done about it, we might collapse in 1918. The United States had entered the war on 6 April 1917, which was great from our point of view, but in May and June the French army was massively defeated by the Germans, resulting in a huge mutiny in its ranks. At the same time, the British generals wanted to break out of the Ypres Salient, so the Germans had very good reason to believe that they could win the war at that time. They felt that the Americans would not get into the war before they had won it. That is fairly true, because the American army was very small, a bit obsolete and did not have many weapons.

Field Marshal Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, desperately wanted to break out of the Ypres Salient where it had been stuck for several years. He wanted to get to the coast, because the strategic aim was to get to those U-boat pens and stop us being throttled by torpedo attacks.

The plan was simple. There was a preliminary operation, which other hon. Members have mentioned, to secure the southern flank of the British position. The first phase was to take out the railway junction at Roulers and to then swing around and advance towards the coast. That was the plan, but it went very badly wrong.

I want to talk about the soldiers. By mid-1917, machine guns had become what Correlli Barnett called the queens of the battlefield. They were devastating. The rifle by comparison was absolutely useless. The 1st Battalion

Cheshire Regiment, which I was to command 74 years later, had been equipped the previous year with 16 Lewis machine guns, which were pretty heavy: they were 28 lb, not including ammunition. Our soldiers had to carry them. Nobody really wanted to take a machine gun as they crossed the frontline, for two reasons: first, it made them an easy target and, secondly, its weight. They scurried across no man's land, going as fast as they could, but it was difficult to go fast in those conditions.

At the same time, by the start of the third battle of Ypres, Passchendaele, our soldiers had been issued with those awful helmets. They called them tin hats. I wore one when I first joined the Army—I am that old—and they were acutely uncomfortable and very heavy. Again, that made it difficult for our soldiers when they scrambled out of their frontline positions.

They had had one hell of a winter: 1916-17 had been incredibly cold. The soldiers received only one hot meal a day and it was usually supplied by the quartermaster in boxes lined with straw. They brewed tea themselves. They would usually fill old jam tins with grease and insert a wick to make a flame on which they would put a pot to heat up the water. Every day, the quartermaster tried to bring clean socks to the frontline positions, because trench foot was appalling. The conditions were so wet and the men needed to try to keep their feet dry, which was almost impossible.

It was good that some of the soldiers in my battalion were allowed leave. They went home and came back, but they knew damn well what they were coming back to. That is why they are heroes—because they came back. They came back from home, where they saw normality. War is not normality. War is disgusting and horrid, and it is something to be avoided. Heroism is going back to that because, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) has said, they did not want to let their friends down.

Even then, in the middle of the war, when reinforcements were coming, those that were supposed to come to my battalion, the 1st Battalion Cheshires, were diverted. The battalion was on the frontline near Cambrai and one would think that, before the battle, it would be fully manned, but it was not. It did not even have enough troops to go along the front. It had to have little posts on the frontline, in the hope that they could cover the area in front of the battalion position.

They knew damn well what would happen when the signal for advance was given—they had been there long enough. On 31 July, very early in the morning, at 3.50, just as dawn was breaking, the battalion's officers blew the whistles. Can you imagine how absolutely terrified our soldiers were? They must have had a hell of a night up to that time. They were laden with ammunition, kit and Lewis machine guns. As H-hour—that is, the start time—was declared, some soldiers were being delivered by train right to the frontline. They disembarked and went straight across the start line and into battle.

When they went into no man's land, it was not a run. It was not even a walk. It was more like a crawl, I would think. No man's land was full of wire obstacles, which sometimes got worse under artillery fire. And then, within hours, the rain came—the worst rainfall for 30 years. The men could not even get into the shell holes, because they were full of water. They were sitting ducks. They were covered in filth, absolutely exhausted, trying to go forward. And that is what they did. Some of

them sank right down to their waists in the mud, and it took six soldiers to pull each of them out. Stretcher bearers could not move—there was no chance at all of them moving in that mud.

Our soldiers were not brave—of course they were brave, but what they really experienced was terror—and they thought that within minutes, within seconds, they would be dead. Perhaps they prayed that it would be a head shot. The soldier's prayer is a head shot, to die straight out, not a wound to the stomach or the abdomen, when no one can get to the wounded and they lie there in agony for hours or days, sometimes just slipping under the mud and drowning while they are at it.

I think I have some idea of what they felt, because I have advanced when someone beside me has been shot. I knew I had to go, because I had to go and get some civilians—I am talking about Bosnia—but I was not a hero; I was not brave, but bloody terrified. I was so terrified that I wet myself. That is not bravery, but what mattered was that we went forward and did our duty. Our soldiers did that. They did not want to die—it was the last thing they wanted to do. They wanted to survive.

Passchendaele was a stalemate for four months, while our men were sitting ducks. It was a disgusting, exhausting and traumatic experience for anyone who was there. It cost both sides dearly. I do not think we know the exact figures, but the British were about 310,000 dead and the Germans 260,000. That was the dead, but three times as many casualties survived. The ratio then was one dead to three wounded.

Haig later justified what happened by saying, “It was necessary. We could take more casualties than the Germans, because we had more resources. That made it worthwhile.” Can anyone imagine a general today trying to give such a justification for the mass slaughter that occurred at Passchendaele? “I thought it was okay, because we could take more casualties than they could, so in the end we would win.” We remember them all, British, German and Commonwealth, today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Mohammad Yasin to make his maiden speech.

2.33 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this very important debate.

It seems fitting to pay tribute to the Bedfordshire Regiment whose men also fought at Passchendaele. Many did not come back home. It is not lost on me that the sacrifices made by those men 100 years ago led to the freedoms, rights and opportunities that I am proudly expressing today. I am deeply honoured not only to have been chosen by the people of Bedford and Kempston to represent them as their Member of Parliament, but to be the first ethnic minority candidate to do so.

I made the journey from Kashmir to Bedford in 1992. Soon I was married and working in a factory. Later I became a taxi driver, which I continued to do until my election to Parliament. I can honestly say that from the moment I arrived in Bedford, I made it my home—but ever since, it is Bedford that has made me. I am very thankful for that.

I wanted to do more for the community that had welcomed me, so I became a councillor for Queens Park ward in 2006. Earlier this year, I took the next step and

was selected by my party to stand as Labour's candidate. Many people said that I stood no chance and that Labour could not possibly win Bedford back. Bedford and Kempston proved them wrong. With the support of my friends and fellow councillors, and my wonderful family—I am so thankful to my wife, Shakila, my mother, my four children and my new grandson, Imad—we fought a campaign that delivered Bedford and Kempston back to Labour. I am immensely proud to be on the Labour Benches, whose shadow Cabinet has the highest number of ethnic minority MPs ever, which means that the population is more fairly represented than it has ever been before.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Richard Fuller, who has worked so hard over the past seven years for his community. The Bedford Community Business School set up by Richard has been a great success and is a legacy that he is rightly very proud of. I also thank Bedford's previous Labour MP, Patrick Hall, for his 13 years of dedicated service.

People from more than 50 countries of origin live and have settled in Bedford and Kempston, which has made the area the most ethnically diverse town in the United Kingdom in proportion to its size. All kinds of people have settled there, from the eastern Europeans and Italians who arrived after the second world war to help rebuild Britain through work in the Stewartby brickworks, to others like me who arrived more recently. It is that which makes my constituency so very special.

Bedford is warm, welcoming, neighbourly and compassionate. Difference and diversity of faith, colour and creed is not only tolerated but celebrated in this town. Churches, mosques, gurdwaras, faith groups and charitable organisations throughout my constituency work together to build upon that diversity and to support those who have been affected by so many years of austerity and damaging cuts.

Bedford has a strong arts scene. Our cultural heritage is celebrated in Bedford's many festivals, not least the biennial River festival that attracts a quarter of a million people to the beautiful riverside. We are also a town of sportspeople, with the Bedford Blues, the Eagles, and the Queens Park and Kempston cricket clubs. We have rowing clubs, sailing clubs and our international athletics track. We have been proud to produce gold Olympians and Paralympians, and then there is Iva Barr, who was still running the London marathon at the age of 88. Bedfordians are amazing people.

People talked to me a lot during the election, about their concerns about schooling, the cuts to policing and, above all, the NHS. At the very heart of our town is Bedford Hospital, where my children and grandson were born. I want to make sure that the hospital stays at the heart of my constituency. Two years ago, Bedford Hospital saved my wife's life when she suffered a heart attack. I can never repay the staff for all they did for us.

Let me say this now: the future of our hospital and its services have been in doubt for far too long. Since 2011, under this Government and the previous one, a string of expensive and inconclusive reviews have cast a shadow over the hospital, lining the pockets of management consultants while hard-working frontline staff have gone without pay rises. Threats to maternity, accident and emergency, and paediatrics make it hard to recruit and retain staff, and have caused much concern to the community.

[*Mohammad Yasin*]

As the As MP for Bedford and Kempston, I will fight every day to keep the services that we need in our growing town so that my constituents do not have to travel 15 or 20 miles to access life-saving services, or 60 miles to access justice if plans to close Bedford courts go ahead.

I want babies to continue to be born in Bedford and Kempston, where they can grow up in a fairer society, access equal opportunities and realise their true potential in families that feel proud and part of their community.

2.40 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bedford (*Mohammad Yasin*). I congratulate him on his maiden speech. I am sure it is the first of many contributions as he represents his community in Bedford and I wish him well.

Today's debate is focused on the battle of Passchendaele. It has been described as a long campaign that took place over several months. It was an honour to be in the Chamber to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) describing the fear that he knows at first hand and what it is like to be in combat. He made a very powerful speech, and he has the respect of all of us for what he said.

I want to focus on a particular time in the battle. At the end of August 1917, Field Marshal Haig decided to replace General Gough With General Plumer. The website "War History Online" reports that General Plumer was an efficient, methodical commander. He had assembled an outstandingly competent staff, who had demonstrated their abilities as a team in a previous operation in Messines Ridge. There would be no rushing a meticulous planner like Plumer. He was told at the end of August 1917 that he was leading the next big attack and he took three weeks to prepare and plan. There was a lull in fighting while he gathered his resources. However, in that lull more than 10,000 men were killed in just over two weeks.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, the weather was atrocious, but for the first time that year it turned to the advantage of the British. The continuous rain that had turned the battlefield into a quagmire let up for 10 whole days. In the relatively dry ground, Plumer's men dug trenches and repaired roads.

The skills and techniques of artillerists had been refined over the preceding three years, and Plumer made use of that. When his artillery opened fire at 5.40 on 20 September, they did so in planned formation. Guns were concentrated to provide one for every 5.2 yards of ground to be attacked. Infantry advanced behind the shelter of a creeping barrage, one of the great innovations of the war. A wall of explosions helped to hide them from the fire of their enemies and to force those enemies to keep their heads down.

Today, we are rightly discussing and commemorating people who sacrificed their lives on the battlefield. However, in my city of Leeds, which I am proud to represent, we have Barnbow armouries. In the first world war, we had the Leeds canaries—women who made the munitions that would have been used in the battle. They were called canaries because the TNT turned their skin yellow. They knew that they were being

poisoned and were likely to become sterile. Tragically, on Tuesday 5 December 1916, there was an explosion in which 35 women were killed instantly. They have been commemorated in this place previously, but I want to take the opportunity to do so again. When the explosion happened, the War Office realised that it could not release the names of the women in obituaries at the time because it did not want the enemy to know where the munitions were being made. Over the next year, one woman a week had her obituary in the *Yorkshire Post*. The obituaries glossed over what the women were doing. There were casualties back home as a result of involvement in the battles as well as people dying on the frontline.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Richard Pinkett, a constituent from Belper, posts regularly on Facebook about people from Belper who died in the many different battles of the first world war. Belper is much bigger than it was and the posts show that not only the people who were killed in the battles but the families in the local region were affected. So many families in so many communities were affected by the deaths of their sons. My hon. Friend mentions the women who bravely helped. We should remember the people back home as well as those on the frontline. In Belper, a flag in the memorial garden is lowered to half-mast every time we commemorate 100 years since one of the young men died. It is a testament to local people that we do not forget those who died.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point so powerfully. We all have examples in our constituencies of people who were affected by the wars, and I am sure that we are all there on Remembrance Sunday to pay our respects, no matter how long ago the deaths occurred.

On 20 September 1917, there was an early morning mist and the temperature was about 66° F. The main thrust of the advance was on the Menin road, which led south-east across the ridge and toward the town of Menin. South of the road, the Germans put up heavy resistance, especially around their strong defence of Tower Hamlets. The advance was successful, but Tower Hamlets remained in German hands.

Remarkable advances were made on Menin road itself. The 11th Prince of Wales's Own (West Yorkshire Regiment) and 69 Trench Mortar Battery took Inverness Copse, long a target of British attacks. Near Langemarck, the Germans held the strongly fortified positions of Eagle Farm and Eagle Trench. The task of driving them out initially fell to 11th Rifle Brigade, 12th Rifle Brigade, and 6th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. The 12th Rifles and the Light Infantry took Eagle Farm and moved on to seize the southern end of Eagle Trench. The 11th Rifles lost two thirds of their men before securing a section of the trench. For three days, Eagle Trench was divided between the Germans and the British.

I want to focus on 20 September 1917, the first day of the battle. When I was a child, our family visited the Tyne Cot cemetery, and on the memorial wall at the back are the words "Rifleman Harold Edward Shelbrooke, Kings Royal Rifle Corps". My great grandfather—Ted as he was known—was killed on the first day of the battle. Harold Edward Shelbrooke was born on Christmas eve 1883 and married in 1915. On 16 January 1916 his son, my grandfather, George Edward Shelbrooke, was born.

Ted had three sisters and he used to walk through the Blackwall tunnel to court May, my great grandmother. By profession, Ted was an umbrella maker. His family lived in Poplar. His father, my great great grandfather, was killed in a gas explosion at Poplar gas works in April 1891.

Ted joined up in April 1916 because he had been white-feathered in Greenwich and it had played on his mind. He was not liable to be called up under the Military Service Act 1916 because he was a married man. That all changed later, in June 1916, when the second Act was passed and married men were included, but he signed up before then. His wife pleaded with him not to do it and to think of the baby, but he was determined to serve his King and country and, more importantly, he understood the consequences of our sitting and not doing anything. He joined the King's Royal Rifle Corps, which was stationed at Winchester, and that is where he did his initial training. My family do not have his military records, so I am not sure when he embarked for France, but my aunt has a postcard dated 20 July 1916, when he was transferred to Seaford, Sussex, prior to embarkation. We know little more after that. His younger brother-in-law, John Culley, joined up with him aged 15. Uncle Jack was, in common parlance, a man of small stature, and he was only about 17 at the time of the battle. He was employed—I use the term loosely—as a bugler in the trenches, but he did fight.

Uncle Jack—as he was known—survived the war, dying in 1981. He told my grandfather, George, that he saw Ted being stretchered off when a shell burst near them, and Ted and the medics were not seen again. No one knows whether they were blown to pieces or fell into one of the flooded shell holes and drowned. His body was never found. That is why his name is on the wall at the back of the Tyne Cot cemetery, along with those of tens of thousands of other men whose bodies were never found.

May Shelbrooke, my great-grandmother, could not accept that Ted had died and his body had not been found. That very much plays into what many Members have said today about the lasting effects of the war. May wrote constantly to the British Red Cross for about three years to find out whether Ted had been taken prisoner. When she was sent the famous “war penny”, she threw it across the room, exclaiming, “I don’t want a bloody penny. I want my husband.” She was well supported by her family, and she lived with them for the remainder of her life. She never remarried, and she died in January 1977. She had to work to support her son, so she got a job in the office of Charlton Glassworks, where she stayed until she retired.

May’s son George became a precious member of the family and proved to be a bright child, but his grandmother was a strict matriarch and forbade him to take the entrance exam for John Roan Grammar School because she wanted him to leave school as soon as possible and work in a shop. That is another of the ongoing consequences of this terrible war. The only son of a widowed mother was told, “I am sorry, but you have to go out and provide for our family: you have to work.” To those who know me, it will come as no surprise that there is a streak of rebellion in my family. George rebelled at that, and when he left school at 14, he found a job as a laboratory technician in an oil company on the Isle of Dogs called Sternol. He went to Woolwich Polytechnic

in the evenings to gain his science qualifications, eventually running his own department researching electrical insulation oils.

In September 1940, George married Helena Theresa Buck, whose father had also fought at Passchendaele. Alfred George Buck was born on 15 November 1885 in Meerut, Bengal, India. His father was in the Royal Horse Artillery in India. He was educated at the Duke of York’s Royal Military School and the Royal Hibernian Military School, and enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery at Woolwich on 29 February 1904. He transferred to the Army Reserve on 29 February 1912, reverted on 29 July 1913, and was mobilised in Glasgow on 6 August 1914. Having transferred to the Royal Engineers Signals in April 1916, he was awarded the Military Medal in July 1917 for gallant conduct and devotion to duty at Armentières. We do not have the medal or the citation, but we understand that he was repairing telephone cables in no man’s land under fire. I think that the experience outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham must make clear to all of us the fear that he must have felt when he was in the middle of no man’s land, a sitting duck, repairing vital communications. He was gassed on 4 November 1917 at Passchendaele, two days before the battle ended, and was discharged on 15 March 1919. He died on 6 July 1952.

The trauma of the first world war was still at the front of people’s minds when, only a couple of decades later, this country was again at war. To the relief of his mother May and his new wife Helena, the rebellion that had led to his becoming a scientist placed my grandfather, George Edward Shelbrooke, on the Reserved Occupations list at the beginning of the second world war. He became an air raid warden and a fire watcher during the Blitz in 1940–41. He explained to my father, Derek Edward Shelbrooke—who, I am proud to say, is in the Public Gallery today—how he used to stand on top of the oil tanks at Sternol during a raid and, armed with just a broom, sweep the incendiary bombs down to the men below, who would throw them into the River Thames.

That, I think, is something that we can barely imagine, along with everything else that was happening. The danger, the threats and the loss of life were as great at home as they were at the front, especially during the second world war. George was eventually called up in January 1944, and joined the Irish Guards. After training, he volunteered for the Guards Armoured Division. He was very proud of his service in the Guards. Sadly, in August 1985 he died, too young, at 69.

The impact on families of the great war lasted decades longer than the war itself. My grandfather never knew his father, and the trauma that his mother felt must have been overwhelming when the second world war started and her only son was put in danger as a fire warden, and then eventually called up and sent to war.

The sacrifice that we make our young make is through the failure of politicians like ourselves and it must never be forgotten. I do not agree with much of what the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said, but I agree with him on this. At heart, every single person in the Chamber is fundamentally pacifist, but we understand that there is a necessity for war at times, that there is a consequence to not taking action and that, if we do not take that action, the loss of life can often be greater.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

We are right to commemorate, at this time, the sacrifice made. We should learn those lessons and how to move on. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) has done an incredible job. I pay tribute to him for his work over the past few years in ensuring that the centenary anniversary is used not just to remember what happened, but to understand what happened and to educate new generations. I think it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) who made the point that the battle of Passchendaele is as distant to someone today as the battle of Waterloo, but we have to understand why it happened and how we move on.

On 20 September this year, my family will again visit Tyne Cot to see my great-grandfather's name on that wall, to take part in the commemorations of his comrades, all our fellow countrymen and those on the opposing side who died as well, and to remember the sacrifices made in that terrible war.

2.56 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who gave a poignant account of the canaries and in particular his family history. As someone who also grew up in south-east London, I appreciate many of the stories. I wonder whether this will interest the Minister as well. My grandfather, Oliver Frederick Noyes, enlisted with the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry. He was from Salisbury. The Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry saw service in the third battle of Ypres. It is a sort of pride. There have been so many references already to the people of Wales, to all the people who were affected by the conflict and in particular to Hedd Wyn, to whom I would like to turn.

The county of Meirionnydd was the home of Ellis Humphrey Evans, one of the hundreds of thousands of casualties at the third battle of Ypres, a campaign described by the Prime Minister of the time, David Lloyd George, Earl of Dwyfor, as “one of the greatest disasters of the war”.

To his superior officers in the 15th Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, 30-year-old Private Evans was most likely just another raw rural recruit, conscripted into the Army because of a surfeit of sons already working on the family farm. Ellis Evans died on 31 July, shot in the stomach—we have heard about the soldiers' prayer; being shot in the stomach is one of the most agonising things that someone could suffer—on the first day in the battle of Pilckem Ridge. He is buried in Artillery Wood cemetery. There is a war memorial in the centre of Trawsfynydd, which commemorates his death and the loss of 32 other men from the community or nearby army camps. This is where the story changes key. Ellis Evans could just be the smudged portrait in a dog-eared photograph, forgotten by the third generation, save for the fact that we do not remember him as Ellis Evans; we remember him as Hedd Wyn—not as Private 61117, but as a chaired poet, *prif fardd Eisteddfod Penbedw, eisteddfod y Gadair Ddu*, which was held in Birkenhead.

Ellis Evans, whose literary name was Hedd Wyn, grew up in a community where poetry in the strict rules of cynghanedd flourished. Men—it must be said that at

the time they were probably almost exclusively men—from all social backgrounds could win accolade in metrical, alliterative poetry whose unbroken tradition can be traced over a millennium and more.

Sixteen days before his death, Private Evans had posted his entry for the 1917 Eisteddfod of Wales to the adjudicators. He had come second in the previous year's Eisteddfod and he was never to know that this time he would be victorious. The winner of the awdl in the Eisteddfod is awarded a chair. The winner's chair at the 1917 Birkenhead Eisteddfod was draped in a black cloth, *Y Gadair Ddu*, the black chair, crafted by a Belgian refugee. It became, of course, the symbol of mourning for every Welsh-speaking farmhouse, manse and worker's cottage—the bond of tragedy to unite mothers bringing telegrams to the chapel minister to translate from English into Welsh. Our stories are our common heritage, and what we choose to remember becomes our history. Some stories are more retold than others.

Parc Cenedlaethol Eryri, the Snowdonia National Park Authority, is to be commended on taking the initiative to bring together a national investment worth £4 million, with support also from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Welsh Government. This money has enabled the purchase and renovation of Hedd Wyn's family farm, *Yr Ysgwrn*. It has just reopened this year as a publicly owned treasure for the nation. Perhaps the Minister might appreciate visiting *Yr Ysgwrn*; it is an impressive place.

Before this initiative was taken, Hedd Wyn's nephew, Gerald Williams, made sure the door was open to visitors. I remember taking my daughter, Lisa, there 10 years ago. Only the ground floor could visitors see: a kitchen to the left, parlour to the right; the kitchen with hooks in the rafters, a fire always in the range and—this made an impression on me—layer upon layer of wallpaper to keep the place smart, for this house-proud family.

The parlour was the place where people would keep their Eisteddfod chair, and there it was—it was full of Eisteddfod chairs and newspaper cuttings. Visitors could pore over the *Gadair Ddu*. It was there; we could put our hand on it, brittle with romantic Celtic ornamentation, and repaired—again, we could see this—with dark wax to match the colour of the dark wood.

Although this makes for a romantic story, it was, of course, history at its most vulnerable. There is a pathos in the solitary guardian, Gerald Williams, but it took almost a century for the authorities of Wales to committee—“committee” is a verb in Wales—their way to safeguarding the symbols of Wales's national war poet.

The film “Hedd Wyn” was released in 2005 and became the first Welsh-language film to be nominated for an Oscar. It is to the credit of the director Paul Turner and script writer Alan Uwyd that this film has been shown to generations of school students.

To close, here is Hedd Wyn's englyn to his friend David Owen Evans of Blaenau Ffestiniog, who was killed in the trenches—and we find this on gravestones across Wales and also on the memorial in Trawsfynydd:

“Ei aberth nid a heibio—ei wyneb

Annwyl nid a'n ango’.

Er I'r Almaen ystaenio Ei dwrn dur yn ei waed o.”

There has been some discussion in this debate about pacifist attitudes and celebrating war. It would be beneficial

if we could put energy, time, emotion, imagination and funding into building peace as vigorously as we do into addressing war.

3.3 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): There has been a remarkable series of speeches in this debate so far, not least the one we have just heard from the hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and I will not usurp the role of the Minister in singling any of them out for special mention, other than to say in respect of the maiden speech we heard that the pride that the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) takes in his town will no doubt incentivise him to be sure that Bedford will be proud of him by the way he conducts himself in this place.

As other more knowledgeable speakers have already explained, a century after the appalling losses on the western front historians still debate whether any alternatives existed. Some blame political intrigue and poor generalship, others emphasise technology, with the battlefield dominated by interlocking fields of fire. This ensured that slowly advancing troops would be mown down by machine guns before making any worthwhile inroads into the enemy's trenches. Minor advances, occasionally achieved, were usually reversed by counter-attacks or simply absorbed into a new, static confrontation a short distance from the original one.

A book called “Forgotten Victory” is a study of the western front battles that rightly draws attention to the 100 days campaign in which the allied coalition won a sequence of decisive victories between mid-July and early November 1918. Its author, Professor Gary Sheffield, regrets the extent to which the British success in those battles at the end of the first world war has been disregarded. For example, he says:

“The burden of fighting the German Army fell mainly to the French and Russians in the first two and a half years of the war, but in 1918 it was the turn of the BEF.”

That is, the British Expeditionary Force.

“Between them, the French, Americans and Belgians took 196,700 prisoners and 3,775 guns between 18 July and the end of the war. With a smaller army than the French, Haig’s forces captured 188,700 prisoners and 2,840 guns in the same period. This was, by far, the greatest military victory in British history.”

So it is absolutely right that, as well as commemorating all the disasters of world war one, one of which we are commemorating today, we will next year recognise the triumph of the battle of Amiens in August 1918. Like others who have spoken in the debate, I pay the warmest tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for all the great work he has done on this rolling series of commemorations of the events, failures and successes of the first world war.

Professor Sheffield, whom I mentioned a moment ago, takes his thesis a bit further than I feel able to go. He suggests that the catastrophic offensives prior to 1918 were in some way needed to enable the allied generals to learn the lessons they eventually applied to the successful campaign at the end of the war. I feel, however, that one should not have to waste the lives of legions of soldiers in the relentless repetition of unsuccessful tactics. Time and again, those tactics failed to break the stalemate, or to be exploited when, occasionally, they managed to achieve surprise.

After the catastrophe on the Somme in 1916, there was really no reason to believe that a breakthrough could be made and exploited with the available technology of the day, yet this was attempted not once but twice in 1917. First came the battle of Arras, which was the second of the three huge attritional offensives waged by the British Army in 1916-17. On the first day of the Arras attack—9 April 1917—the British Third Army took 5,600 prisoners, and the Canadians, who captured most of Vimy Ridge, took a further 3,400. This has been called the greatest success of the British Expeditionary Force since the beginning of trench warfare. However, the British advance soon ran out of steam as German reinforcements arrived, and the British Fifth Army had little to show for the heavy losses it sustained. Further major efforts on 23 April and 3 May 1917, partly intended to tie down forces that might otherwise be used against the French, simply added to the butchery on both sides.

In the spring of 1917, Russia was in revolution, albeit not yet a Bolshevik one, while unrestricted submarine warfare and the diplomatic disaster—from the German point of view—of the Zimmerman telegram had goaded the United States into entering the war on 6 April 1917. So did Britain and France really have to squander so many lives so fruitlessly after that date? Why risk the colossal price of failure when the balance of forces at the strategic level was shifting so dramatically? The German leadership fully understood the significance of American belligerency. They therefore gambled everything in the spring of 1918 to exploit the collapse of Russia before the United States could make a real difference. It was therefore folly for the British and French to wear themselves out in 1917 given that the balance of forces would change in their favour once the Americans arrived. Claiming that the Germans could stand the rate of attrition less than the British was no justification at the time, as we have heard already, and it is equally indefensible now.

After the Arras offensives of April and May came the unprecedented use of giant subterranean mines in a successful attempt to break the deadlock. Nineteen mines were exploded under Messines ridge on 7 June with a force that could be felt on the far side of the English channel. Although surprise was achieved, strategic gain was once again lacking. Nevertheless, on the last day of July 1917, the crowning effort of the BEF was made. The third battle of Ypres would endure until 10 November and imprint itself on the British psyche to an extent matched only by the Somme disaster of the previous year. The focus was on the Passchendaele-Staden ridge, and the main thrust was delivered by General Sir Hubert Gough’s Fifth Army along a 7.5 mile front. The flanks were defended by the British Second Army on the right and the French First Army on the left.

Having overrun some of the outer German defences on the first day, the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, then discovered that the weather was an even more formidable opponent than the enemy. The official history of the air war quotes Haig’s dispatch as follows:

“The low-lying, clayey soil, torn by shells and sodden with rain, turned to a succession of vast muddy pools. The valleys of the choked and overflowing streams were speedily transformed into long stretches of bog, impassable except by a few well-defined tracks, which became marks for the enemy’s artillery. To leave these tracks was to risk death by drowning... In these conditions operations of any magnitude became impossible, and the resumption of our offensive was necessarily postponed until a period of fine weather should allow the ground to recover.”

[*Dr Julian Lewis*]

Thus it was that the second phase of the attack, known as the battle of Langemarck and lasting from 16 to 18 August, lacked any element of surprise. The Germans showed no sign of giving way. Next came the battle of the Menin Road ridge, beginning on 20 September and lasting for five days. Its aim was to capture objectives at a distance of between 1,000 yards and one mile, and that was largely achieved. The pattern was then the same in the fourth phase, known as the battle of Polygon Wood, which took place from 26 September to 3 October 1917, with the objective of securing a jumping-off place from which to attack the main Passchendaele ridge.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way; I had hoped to speak in this debate, but unfortunately I have been off site. He mentioned the battle of Polygon Wood, and I was going to mention that my great-grandfather, who had been in France since August 1914, was wounded there on 30 September and won the Military Medal. I wanted to mention that not only because I am very proud, but because it demonstrates how the war was fought by ordinary folk from normal backgrounds, who then went back to their ordinary lives—my great-grandfather was a postman in east Yorkshire. That is what was going on behind much of the conflict.

Dr Lewis: I am delighted that my mentioning of that phase of this terrible series of battles gave my hon. Friend the opportunity to pay that well-deserved tribute to his brave ancestor.

Andrew Percy: Whose name I wanted to get into *Hansard* but completely forgot to mention—John William Feasey.

Dr Lewis: The award of the Military Medal to John William Feasey is now well and truly, and most justifiably, recorded.

The next assault was planned for 4 October, and was persevered with despite a great deterioration in the weather. It was originally hoped that success at Ypres would drive the Germans away from the channel ports, as my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, and an amphibious force to help achieve that had already been assembled. The reality, in the words of the official history, was very different.

Alec Shelbrooke: My right hon. Friend is rightly describing the sea battle and what was happening at sea, which brought the Americans into the war. Does he agree that, when people ask whether we had to go into the war, the reality is that we could well have been starved out if we had not taken those actions?

Dr Lewis: Yes and no. We certainly had to resist German aggression, but that does not mean there was any justification, when faced with a stalemate, to keep repeating tactics and strategies that were wholly unsuccessful and counterproductive. The concept of the “big push” might have had something to recommend it, despite the obvious imbalance between the technology of the machine gun, on the one hand, and the lack of armoured vehicles to override it, on the other, in the earlier phases of the war. That might have justified a big push on the Somme in 1916, but it did not justify repeating the same lethal strategic nonsense a year later.

This is what the official history has to say about what happened after the outbreak of terrible weather:

“The British line had now been advanced along the main ridge for 9,000 yards... The year was already far spent and the prospect of driving the enemy from the Belgian coast had long since disappeared. The continuous delays in the advance as a result of the weather and its effect on the state of the ground, had given the enemy time, after each attack, to bring up reinforcements and to reorganise his defences. Although General Headquarters now recognised that the major objectives of the Flanders operations were impossible of attainment, they were still anxious to continue the operations with a view to the capture of the remainder of the Passchendaele Ridge before winter set in. The weather was entirely unfavourable but there were hopes that it would improve, hopes based on the somewhat slender foundation that the abnormal rainfall of the summer presaged a normal, perhaps even a dry, autumn.”

Instead of remaining a means to an end, the offensive had become an end in itself. At 5.20 am on 9 October, after two days of continuous heavy rain, the attack was renewed on a six-mile front. Sir Douglas Haig had decided that Passchendaele must be captured, so captured it would be. The cycle was repeated on 12 October in the hope of helping to prevent German forces from being switched to meet the impending French offensive on the River Aisne. Some ground was gained east of Poelcappelle and on the southern edge of Houthulst forest on 22 October, with fighter pilots doing everything they could to attack German infantry in trenches and shell holes, on the roads and in villages.

And so it went on and on—a little progress here, a forced withdrawal there, and the final taking of Passchendaele village on 6 November by the Canadians who, with British assistance, extended their gains on the main ridge four days later. According to the official air historian, Passchendaele was

“the most sombre and bloodiest of all the battlefields of the war”.

One of the pilots who lived through it, and later reached the highest rank in the RAF, was Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, who, as Sholto Douglas, commanded 84 Squadron’s SE5 fighters when he returned to the western front in September 1917. He, too, regarded third Ypres as

“the most terrible of all the battles of the Great War”.

He wrote the following:

“The Somme of the year before had been bad enough, and after that it was felt that the lesson of the futility of mass attacks must surely have been learnt. But it was not learnt, and less than a year later our Army was called upon to embark on an offensive that in so many ways was even more terrible than the Somme”.

He continued by saying that Passchendaele

“was the beginning of what was to become for those on the ground a long and indescribable misery...all the drainage systems were smashed in the opening bombardment, and eventually the whole area became clogged with mud. Over this devastated area, which had been reduced to the state of a quagmire, attack after attack was launched...For communication there were only the rough tracks which wound their way almost aimlessly across the mire, and wandering off them led to drowning. The Germans welcomed the rain as ‘our strongest ally’.”

Many of the pilots in the third battles of Ypres were tasked to carry out low-level attacks against enemy concentrations on the ground. As Sholto Douglas later recalled:

“In this job there was very little fighting in the air, and since we were flying at heights of only two or three hundred feet we were supposed to be able to see plenty of what was going on below us. What I saw was nothing short of horrifying. The ground over which our infantry and light artillery were fighting was one vast

sea of churned-up muck and mud, and everywhere, lip to lip, there were shell holes full of water. These low-flying attacks that we had to make, for which most of my young pilots were quite untrained, were a wretched and dangerous business, and also pretty useless. It was very difficult for us to pick out our targets in the morass because everything on the ground, including the troops, was the same colour as that dreadful mud...it was quite obvious to anyone viewing from the air this dreadful battleground...that any chance of a major advance or a break-through was quite out of the question."

We can see from Douglas's memoirs that it was not just fashionable post-war opinion which came to damn the strategy of attritional offensives. The ordering of more and more attacks in such an appalling "morass" was seen at the time, by him and his comrades, as "the grossest of blunders". They recognised the need to relieve pressure on the French by keeping the Germans fully stretched, but he said that

"as I watched from the air what was happening on the ground there were presented to me some terrible questions. Why did we have to press on so blindly day after day and week after week in this one desolate area and under such dreadful conditions? Why was there not some variety in our strategy and tactics? The questions that I asked then are the questions that have continued to be asked ever since; and the answers to them have never ceased to be most painful ones."

As I said at the outset, I remain completely unconvinced by the argument, which some people deploy even to this day, that it was necessary to undergo the catastrophic failures of the Somme and Passchendaele offensives in order to learn the lessons necessary for victory in 1918. There is testimony enough from senior military figures in the second world war, writing of their experiences as junior officers in the first, spelling out the futility of relentlessly sacrificing huge numbers of British troops in fighting unwinnable battles. One does not have to explore every military cul-de-sac over and over again, in order to stumble across a strategy that might actually succeed.

Let us not forget that each one of these tragedies involved an individual personality, and I close with a quote from a young Welshman, Second Lieutenant Glyn Morgan, who wrote this to his father at the start of the Passchendaele offensive:

"You, I know, my dear Dad, will bear the shock as bravely as you have always borne the strain of my being out here; yet I should like, if possible, to help you to carry on"—

this was a letter that would be sent only in the event of his death—

"with as stout a heart as I hope to 'jump the bags'...My one regret is that the opportunity has been denied me to repay you to the best of my ability for the lavish kindness and devotedness which you have always shown me...however, it may be that I have done so in the struggle between Life and Death, between England and Germany, Liberty and Slavery. In any case, I shall have done my duty in my little way..."

Your affectionate son and brother, Glyn".

Glyn Morgan, who joined the Army straight from school, was killed on 1 August 1917. He was recommended for a posthumous Victoria Cross, and he was just 21 when he died.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): To make his maiden speech, I call Paul Sweeney.

3.25 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak. I also thank right hon. and hon. Members and distinguished strangers in the Gallery for their presence.

I am grateful for this opportunity to deliver my maiden speech and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) who made a remarkable and inspirational maiden speech about his journey from new citizen to Member of this House and we welcome him with genuine hearts.

It is a great privilege to deliver my maiden speech in a debate about such a tumultuous event in our nation's history. I congratulate the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on his re-election as Chair of the Defence Committee and thank my friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for his kind introduction earlier today.

It is customary for a new Member to make some reference to his predecessors, and reflecting on the introductory remarks of Richard Buchanan in his 1964 maiden speech, I noted that he declared:

"If it were within my power to introduce a new tradition to this House, it would be that hon. Members who are making their maiden speeches should do so from the Dispatch Box so that they might lay their trembling hands upon it and give some support to their quaking knees."—[*Official Report*, 5 November 1964; Vol. 701, c. 412.]

On rising to speak today, I can thoroughly attest to my sympathy for those sentiments. The only consolation is that I will not have long to wait for relief, as I will have the first opportunity to address this House from the Dispatch Box next week as shadow Under-Secretary of State for Scotland. I can only hope that it will provide more ample support for my trembling limbs.

Dick Buchanan was the embodiment of the finest political traditions of my constituency: he was a proud railway worker, socialist and trade unionist. During his tenure as a councillor on the Glasgow Corporation, it was not unknown for him to turn up at the city chambers from the Cowlairs railway works in his boiler suit, before changing into the dapper pinstriped suit of the city treasurer. He also left an eminent legacy to future Members of this House as Chairman of the House of Commons Library Committee during its transition from an old-style, gentleman's-club library to the expert modern research facility that is at the disposal of Members of Parliament today. I am sure that that facility has been particularly appreciated by those new Members preparing their maiden speeches.

The area of Glasgow that I represent has a remarkable and diverse history, and that is reflected in the diversity and vibrancy of the people who live there today. From its early origins at the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, it has subsequently been vital to Glasgow's development, even though it was formally incorporated into the city only in 1891, when Glasgow's territory was doubled in size. The Molendinar Burn, on the banks of which the founder of Glasgow, St. Mungo, established his cathedral and with it the surrounding town, flows from Hogganfield Loch, the fresh waters of which also nourished what is the longest established business in the city of Glasgow—Tennent's brewery. The brewery was founded at the Drygate in the 1550s and its amber nectar has slaked the thirst of many a Glaswegian over the centuries.

When I attempt to visualise the evolution of my part of Glasgow, Danny Boyle's epic opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic games immediately springs to mind. What was once an area of sylvan beauty and rural charm, a landscape of farms and weavers' cottages,

[*Mr Paul J. Sweeney*]

was rapidly swept away as the first harbingers of the industrial age emerged—the first canals and, later, the first railways in Scotland which, traversed the district. By happy coincidence of its position on the approach to central Glasgow from Edinburgh and the Lanarkshire coalfields, Springburn found itself at the epicentre of this frenetic growth as railway manufacturing and associated industries coalesced there to form the largest centre of locomotive manufacture in the British empire. At its peak, it employed 8,000 people and had the capacity to build 600 steam locomotives a year, most of which were for export.

Other engineering innovations were pioneered there, too, most notably the Johnston Dogcart, which, in 1895, was the first motor car to be built in Britain by railway engineer George Johnston in Balgrayhill. The first road trials took place in the dead of night, with Johnston driving the car at a reckless 12 mph on a 20-mile journey around Glasgow. For this apparently reckless behaviour, he was charged with contravening the Locomotive Acts by driving his horseless carriage during prohibited hours along Buchanan Street—then, as now, the main shopping thoroughfare in Glasgow.

Today my constituency retains this fine automotive industry pedigree in the form of Allied Vehicles, the largest manufacturer of specialist taxis and mobility vehicles in the United Kingdom, which employs more than 650 highly skilled people in Possilpark. This high-value manufacturer is also ingrained in the community, supporting many excellent projects such as Possibilities, which supports disabled people in the local area, as well as the highly successful Glasgow Tigers speedway.

As my friend the hon. Member for Glasgow South mentioned earlier, our engineering prowess was also critical to supporting Britain's war effort during the first world war. Springburn's railway works gave themselves over to the production of munitions for the duration of the war. Throughout this period, they were responsible for producing war material such as the first tanks and aircraft. The works also produced the first modern artificial limbs for wounded servicemen.

The directors of the North British Locomotive Company even offered their headquarters building to the Red Cross, as existing hospitals were insufficient to cope with the war wounded. It opened on Christmas eve 1914. Wounded troops would be transported directly from the southern channel ports to the hospital on specially converted ambulance trains. By the end of the war, a total of 8,211 servicemen had been treated.

Nearby Stobhill Hospital, the place where I first entered a more peaceful world some 75 years later, was also requisitioned by the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1914 and more than 1,000 patients were cared for there at any given time until the return of the hospital to civilian use in 1920. As an Army reservist, I have the sacrifice that my city made during the first world war impressed on me every year when I attend the Remembrance Day service in George Square. The stark enormity of the statement on the city's cenotaph, that Glasgow raised over 200,000 troops—a fifth of its population—with 18,000 of that number losing their lives and a further 35,000 injured, never fails to move me with the sheer scale of the carnage that afflicted working people a century ago.

My constituency of Glasgow North East was created at the 2005 general election by the amalgamation of the Glasgow Springburn and Glasgow Maryhill seats. Both areas have previously enjoyed excellent representation from exemplary parliamentarians. Although my seat was once described as a Labour citadel, there were even two Conservative Members in the interwar period, though that was thankfully a brief dalliance. The metaphorically and physically towering legacy of my antecedents was brought into sharp focus when I recently had the opportunity to venture into the Speaker's House and was confronted by a 14-foot-high oil painting of Lord Martin of Springburn and Port Dundas. If there was ever a more effective device to make his successors feel simultaneously inspired and inadequate I have yet to find one.

Michael Martin succeeded Dick Buchanan as the MP for Springburn from 1979 to 2009, which of course culminated in his election as Speaker of the House of Commons from 2000 onwards. His parliamentary career, spanning seven consecutive general elections, was selflessly committed to the service of others and epitomises the opportunity that the Labour movement has offered for the advancement of working-class people over the last century. He rose from being a Springburn sheet metal worker and shop steward to become the Speaker of this House. I was particularly gratified to meet Lord Martin just last week, and he told me of his delight that his seat was now back in “safe hands”, as he put it.

My first ever experience of party political campaigning was in the Glasgow North East by-election of 2009, after a telephone call from Gordon Brown's wife Sarah drew me from my exam revision to help William Bain hold the seat for Labour. As someone who was also born and raised in the local area—we were both the first members of our respective families to benefit from a university education—William proved to be a dedicated, industrious and committed champion for our city and its communities during his time in the House, speaking vociferously in opposition to the coalition Government's vicious and self-defeating austerity policies during his tenure as shadow Scotland Office Minister.

Before I had the opportunity to meet my immediate predecessor, Anne McLaughlin, I watched her maiden speech with great interest when she delivered it almost two years ago to the day, in July 2015. I was particularly impressed by her yearning passion for improving the lives of her constituents and restoring civic pride to our communities—a passion that I share deeply. Anne cited the example of the project to restore the historic Springburn winter gardens, the largest glasshouse in Scotland, as a totemic symbol of our mission to continue regenerating a community that is still contending with the challenge of urban dereliction. As one of the founders of the project, I was personally delighted that Anne made such a generous endorsement of our efforts in her maiden speech. I would also like to thank her for the friendly and good-natured election campaign we conducted in June and I look forward to working together in areas of mutual interest in the future.

All the maiden speeches of my predecessors reflect common challenges that have faced our constituents over the years. Though much progress has been made in certain areas, unfortunately many of the issues they identified decades ago remain all too stubbornly apparent today. Michael Martin referred to the urgent need to

strengthen Government intervention in developing new industries to revitalise the local economy and alleviate the unemployment and despair caused by the collapse of locomotive manufacturing. That legacy of decline is something that my constituency has never fully recovered from. I felt that keenly from an early age, as I learned about Springburn's past industrial glories from my grandparents. It is what inspired me to follow my grandfather and father into the Clyde shipbuilding industry, and later to move to Scottish Enterprise, burning with a zeal to rejuvenate the great Clyde-built industries that once gave pride and prosperity to our city.

Having recently been involved with the development of Labour's new industrial strategy for Scotland, I am excited about the opportunity before us to unlock a new era of prosperity with the application of coherent, long-term thinking about the development of more high-value industries in our country, and I look forward to pursuing that vision with vigorous enthusiasm in this place.

Another recurring subject for my predecessors is housing, particularly exploitation by private landlords and the mass clearance of housing in areas such as Springburn. All Glasgow Labour MPs have stood firmly in the tradition of John Wheatley and his famous Housing Act of 1924, which provided state subsidies for house building to build a land fit for heroes. It led directly to the creation of Glasgow's municipal housing system, and saw large-scale building of some 57,000 new homes in new districts such as Riddrie and Carntyne in my constituency between the wars.

Heroines such as Mary Barbour led the struggle against rapacious landlordism during the first world war; she led the women of the city in the 1915 rent strike that ultimately forced this House to legislate to control rents for the duration of the war. I am delighted that my predecessor Maria Fyfe, who represented Glasgow Maryhill for so many years, has successfully campaigned for a statue commemorating Mary Barbour and the Glasgow rent strikers—only the fourth statue of a woman to be erected in the city of Glasgow.

As a result of the efforts of my predecessor Michael and others, Glasgow pioneered the modern housing association movement that saved many of the traditional Victorian tenements in areas such as Dennistoun and Springburn. By writing off the city's £1 billion housing debt, the last Labour Government enabled an unprecedented renewal of its housing stock, led by organisations such as ng homes; more than £100 million has been invested in improving housing standards in my constituency. These physical improvements are about not just the sandstone, glass and slate, but reinvigorating the very soul and character of our city, and what it means and feels like to be a Glaswegian from one generation to the next.

These efforts have, however, been frustrated by Conservative party policies that continue to undermine living standards in my constituency. Despite efforts to regenerate our communities, my constituents are still subject to the indignity of benefit sanctions, tax credit cuts and frozen wages. With unemployment and benefit claimant rates in my constituency double the national average, and child poverty at a disgraceful 36%, the continued onslaught of Tory cuts to living standards is too much to bear for many. When a constituent approaches me in the street to describe how she was forced to

financially support her son and his partner, who was suffering from a terminal brain tumour, for nine months before his death, as he had been found fit to work and had had his benefits cut, it is clear to me that we have seen the creation of a new national minimum definition of dignity, under which anything short of starvation and anything above destitution is now seemingly acceptable—a definition that is apparently blind to any appeal to human compassion. That view was galvanised when I watched those on the Government Benches cheer with perverse triumph as our effort to remove the public sector pay cap was defeated last month, quite oblivious to the harm it causes to millions of people.

My duty as a Labour Member of Parliament has been crystallised by those observations. The people of Glasgow North East sent me here because they despair of the Tories and yearn for the vision of hope and prosperity that Labour has offered them under the inspirational leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn).

In 1948, this House, having witnessed the disastrous effects of two terrible world wars, was told that the welfare state had been established to remove the shame from need and to create a society with solidarity at its foundation. Today it is our solemn responsibility to do everything in our power to defeat this Government and restore that abiding principle in our society. That is why the people of Glasgow North East sent me here, and I will do my utmost to repay their faith in me through how I acquit myself in pursuit of that endeavour in this House.

3.39 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It falls to me to congratulate my compatriot, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), on his maiden speech. There can be little doubt that he will bring passion, commitment and conviction to the proceedings of the House. I look forward to many jousts across the Floor of the House over the coming months and, hopefully, years. I was delighted to hear him recognising previous Scottish Conservative occupants of his seat. That was very encouraging; we look forward to further success down the years. I also congratulate him on his new position, which he mentioned. I look forward to seeing him at the Dispatch Box as soon as next week.

I rise with a degree of humility to make a small contribution of my own, and to pay tribute to those who fought and died during Passchendaele, the third battle of Ypres—the biggest British offensive of 1917. I say that I rise with humility because of the calibre of speeches in this debate. I have been informed and deeply moved by the things I have heard. I was particularly moved by the contributions of Members who have spoken in Welsh. Something has been passed to me from my great-grandmother, Mary Ann Owen Blakemore, which thrills at the sound of the Welsh language. Her son and my great-uncle, Harry Blakemore, served in the great war and died in the early months of 1918. He plays an important part in our family history, even though his life was short.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) spoke about the impact that first world war cemeteries and sites have on young people. My wife and I have made it a matter of course to take our children to these sacred places. My hon. Friend described

[Stephen Kerr]

the effect that those places have on young people, and I have witnessed that in my own children. He mentioned the dawning realisation of the sacrifice and slaughter of the great war, and it does make a massive impression on young minds. It reminds them and all of us of the price of our freedom. I have stood and witnessed the last post ceremony at the Menin Gate many times. It is an incredibly moving experience. I wish that every schoolchild in the country could have the privilege of standing there and visiting those sites because of the impact the experience has on our minds.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about the education of young people. On a slightly tangential but important point, may I urge him to make contact with the Holocaust Educational Trust, which does massively important work in taking young people to Auschwitz, which shows what unbridled power can lead to?

Stephen Kerr: I thank my hon. Friend for that point of information. I will follow up on his invitation.

I was deeply moved by the account of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), which I hope others who were not in the Chamber will have the opportunity to view and read. It was uplifting, and I thank him very much.

My constituency of Stirling has a long-standing connection with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who fought on the front line at Passchendaele. These things are all well documented, and the many war memorials throughout my constituency are filled with the names of local men who went off to fight, bravely answering their country's call. Behind each of the names engraved on those memorials there is a family left behind and broken-hearted.

It is also important to note in this debate that the men who fought at Passchendaele and throughout the great war were gathered from across the British empire. The cemeteries of the western front are full of gravestones for Australians; New Zealanders, whose worst casualty figures came from Passchendaele; South Africans—Hindus and Muslims alike; Canadians; and Newfoundlanders. Men from all over the imperial territory, from every walk of life, from every race, and from every faith, background and culture came to fight for the mother country in its hour of need. In doing so, they came together in a common cause.

In later years, it has become a fashionable narrative that the men who went to fight for the British empire were victims whose blood was spent wastefully by British officers who had no concern for the men of the colonies. My dear friend Dr Iain Banks, who is a senior lecturer in history at the University of Glasgow and the executive director of the Centre for Battlefield Archaeology, refutes and counters this idea. He calls it

“a false idea, because the men coming from the colonies were not unwilling victims, pressganged conscripts being sent to die. Certainly, the men of the AIF”—

the Australian Imperial Force—

“who had arrived on the Western Front in 1915 were not sacrificial lambs; according to research carried out by the historical unit of the Australian Army, these men were confident and eager for the fight, and they had come to sort out the mess that the old country had made.”

The Scottish memorial in Flanders stands as a permanent reminder of the contribution that Scotland made to the British action at Ypres. This memorial is the only one on the western front dedicated to all Scots and all those of Scottish descent who fought in France and Flanders during the 1914–18 war. Scottish soldiers made a major contribution to the efforts of the British Army during the battle at Passchendaele, and it is worth pointing out that their sacrifice was proportionately greater—one might say, more disproportionate.

Between 31 July and 10 November 1917, all three Scottish divisions were on the western front. They were included in the 9th and 15th Divisions and the 51st Highland Division. These men came from all over Scotland, representing famous Scottish regiments: the Black Watch, the Seaforth Highlanders, the Gordon Highlanders, the Cameron Highlanders, the Royal Scots, the Royal Scots Fusiliers, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, the Cameronians and the Highland Light Infantry. The famous local regiment from my constituency, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was in the thick of the fighting, with representatives in all three divisions, and it took casualties in every significant phase of the action.

Bob Stewart: I thank my very good hon. Friend for giving way. May I just remind the House that a lot of Scottish soldiers in reinforcement units were diverted to English, Welsh and Irish regiments? It is therefore absolutely apposite that there is a Scottish memorial to all Scottish soldiers, whichever regiment they served in. After all, some of us go abroad and command English regiments.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my very good hon. Friend for his intervention. It is also a tribute to the fighting qualities of Scottish soldiers that they can be reassigned and deployed as he suggested.

However, there were not only Scots involved. The Canadians, the Newfoundlanders and the New Zealanders, in particular, included a lot of Scottish immigrants and sons of immigrants, who were committed to the battle. The Scottish memorial project reports that of the nine Canadian Victoria Crosses awarded in the last week of October and the first week of November alone, the majority were awarded to Scottish-born immigrants or the sons of Scots immigrants.

Those who came back lived with the legacy of what they experienced. We have heard some very apposite comments about that legacy in this debate. Those who did not return—we will remember them. We must not make the mistake of thinking that these soldiers were passive victims of a war they did not understand or support. That is a view that is often expressed in certain quarters, especially when people say that we have not learned the lessons of past wars. Whether or not they understood the war in the way that we might want them to understand it, they fought because they wanted to do their bit; because they had been conscripted and it was their duty to go; because they were with men who had become their mates and they were not going to let them down. We do our fallen no justice when we strip them of the dignity that comes with the recognition of their agency. They joined up, they answered their nation's call, and they reported to the conscription hall. We can argue about the conduct of the war, but never let us downplay the sacrifice of the men who went to war and laid down their lives.

Whether a person loses their life in the service of their country in a vast battle in a global war such as the one we are talking about, or whether one person loses their life individually, without record or attention paid, such sacrifice is most worthy of remembrance. This is partly the inspiration behind the Unknown Warrior, who rests, anonymously, in the place of highest honour in our nation. While the war memorials, the remembrance services, the cenotaphs, the cemeteries and debates like these are a vital—indeed, essential—reminder of that sacrifice, the true honour and respect we must give to their memory is the kind of country and the kind of world we are building. The approach we take towards one another, and the way we work together as a country, within our borders and across borders, must always honour their sacrifice.

Those who died would no doubt have held a wide variety of opinions and views, as we do. They would have had the same broad diversity of opinion that the population of the country had at that time. Socialists, Liberals and Conservatives all fought and died together. They would have had their differences and disagreements, just as we do, as I said earlier, but demonstrating courtesy and respect to those whose opinions and beliefs differ from our own is one vital aspect of the way we honour the sacrifice of the fallen, as is enlisting ourselves in the pursuit of peace and justice for all, and the advancement of the civil society and democracy that I believe we all believe in. These aims are indeed a fit and proper memorial worthy to the memory of the sacrifice of so many souls.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I thank the last two speakers—the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who made an excellent maiden speech, and the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr)—for what they said about the Highland Light Infantry, because my grandfather served with them and was injured at Passchendaele. I am not able to make a tribute from the Chair, so I thank those hon. Gentlemen for doing it for me.

3.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be able to make a short contribution to this important debate and to follow so many interesting, thoughtful and informative speeches. It is a particular pleasure to have listened to two wonderful maiden speeches this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) talked about making his life in Bradford, having moved here from Kashmir, and I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) well for his Dispatch Box debut next week.

Like many other towns and cities up and down the country, on 30 July my constituency of Heywood and Middleton will commemorate the battle of Passchendaele. We will meet in Heywood memorial gardens as part of the programme of first world war commemorative events. I pay tribute to Rochdale Borough Council for its work and commitment in organising all those events, which are always very well attended by my constituents. They are observed with huge respect for those who gave their lives for our country, those who fought and survived, and all their families and descendants.

I want to give a special mention to Councillor Alan McCarthy, our lead member for the armed forces. I thank him for his work both in that role and as chair of Heywood Township, whose councillors, after consultation with the veterans, decided that commemorations of the centenary of the first world war should be held not in celebration, but rather in solemn reflection and in remembrance of all those who have died and served in our armed forces since the start of the great war.

It is important to remember that almost everyone in the UK has an ancestor directly affected by the first world war, and that nearly 1 million men and women gave their lives in service. My constituent Lynne Coxell, whose second cousin William Robinson died at the age of 18 in the first world war, will be among the many attending the memorial service at Ypres on 31 July, to remember their sacrifice. Lynne has donated William's pocket watch and other artefacts, including his prayer book, to the Passchendaele Museum in his memory.

The Heywood war memorial, where our local commemorations will be held, has its own very special link to the battle of Passchendaele. The war memorial was unveiled in 1925. A statue representing peace stands in front of the cenotaph, with bowed head and bearing a laurel wreath representing victory.

The statue was sculpted by Walter Marsden, an English sculptor born in 1882 in Church, near Accrington in Lancashire, in the constituency of Hyndburn. In 1901 he was an apprentice at the Accrington Brick and Tile Company, whose owners, the McAlpine family, recognised his talent and encouraged him to study at the Accrington Technical School. From there he went on to study at the Manchester Municipal College of Art, and in the 1911 census he gave his occupation as “clay modeller”.

Walter Marsden himself saw active service in the first world war as an officer in the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. He fought in the third battle of Ypres, the battle of Passchendaele, for which he was awarded the Military Cross. He was later taken prisoner at Cambrai in France and sent to a prisoner of war camp.

After the war he continued his studies and attended the Royal College of Art. He later worked on many war memorials, many of which are in Lancashire. As well as the memorial in Heywood, there are Walter Marsden war memorials in his hometown of Church, Bolton, Tottington in Bury, and St Annes-on-Sea.

His sculptures reflect his experience of active service. The memorial at St Annes-on-Sea depicts walking wounded returning from the battlefield, blinded by gas. A gaunt, exhausted, helmetless soldier is seated at its base. Walter Marsden said that he had wanted to capture “the constant nervous rain of trench warfare and the ever-present feeling of danger that was the cause of so much mental agony.” I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), because I think he gave us the reality of that with his own experience.

Walter Marsden also depicted a husband going off to war, his wife clutching at him, with a small, sad child looking up helplessly. His memorials tread a delicate line, portraying the human cost of war while paying proper tribute to bravery and sacrifice. The war memorial in Heywood is inscribed:

“To the men of Heywood who gave their lives for us during the Great War 1914–1918”.

It commemorates by name the 300 men who died in service.

[*Liz McInnes*]

I finish by quoting the words on the Walter Marsden war memorial in his home town of Church, Lancashire. That is a fitting point on which to end. The memorial is inscribed:

“Let those who come after see to it that their names be not forgotten”.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Ben Lake to make his maiden speech.

4 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for affording me the opportunity to make my maiden speech this afternoon.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and, in particular, the hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), who both made excellent maiden speeches. Indeed, they set an exacting standard. They spoke from the heart and I have no doubt that they will be a credit to their party, their constituencies and this House.

I welcome the opportunity to remember the third battle of Ypres in the House and to commemorate the first world war. As the years go by, it becomes increasingly important that we remember the conflict and especially the sacrifice of all those who lost their lives. We must ensure that we learn the lessons of the past and strive never again to subject people to such suffering and horror. While visiting one of the many Commonwealth war cemeteries that pepper the Flemish countryside, it was heartbreaking to stumble across seemingly never-ending rows of young lives cut short by the conflict.

As has already been mentioned this afternoon, perhaps the most famous of the casualties from Wales was Ellis Humphrey Evans, or Hedd Wyn, a son of Trawsfynydd, in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). Hedd Wyn was a talented poet who, tragically, was killed before learning of his greatest literary triumph. Just a few weeks before winning the most prestigious prize for poetry at the National Eisteddfod, the bardic chair, he was killed at the battle of Passchendaele at the young age of 30.

A manuscript of the winning ode, “Yr Arwr”, or “The Hero”, in Hedd Wyn’s own hand, is one of the many precious treasures housed at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. This sentinel of our nation’s heritage is perched on Penglais hill, overlooking Cardigan bay, a jewel of the Welsh coast, which I now have the privilege of representing as the Member for Ceredigion. I am truly humbled that the people of this great constituency have put their faith in me to speak for them in this place. I am looking forward to working hard on their behalf and serving them well, and I will strive to be worthy of this trust.

My immediate predecessor, Mark Williams, was elected in 2005. He gained the respect of this House and the affection of the constituency, thanks to over 12 years of tireless service. Thousands of people from across the county have benefited from his advice and assistance, and I hope to continue with his good work. I wish him and his family the very best for the future.

Ceredigion is my home. From the peak of Pen Pumlumon Fawr to the tranquillity of the Teifi estuary, its hills and valleys rarely fail to speak to its sons and daughters. It is no surprise that hiraeth should be such a common affliction of Cardis who find themselves absent from the county for too long. As the second most sparsely populated county in Wales, Ceredigion is largely a rural area. Agriculture is the backbone of many of our communities. Farming not only supports a significant proportion of the workforce, but also sustains a range of social activities and events that are the lifeblood of the county.

Ceredigion stretches from the banks of the Dyfi in the north to Cardigan Island in the south. It is bounded in the east by the magnificent hills of the Elenydd, and flanked to the west by spectacular coastline. Indeed, this year blue flags proudly fly above the pristine beaches at Aberporth, Aberystwyth, Borth, Llangrannog, New Quay and Tresaith. Tourism plays a vital economic role in the area, which is unsurprising given that Ceredigion is widely acknowledged to be the most beautiful constituency in Wales.

Ceredigion’s natural beauty is complemented by the diverse nature of her settlements, from the picturesque Georgian harbour town of Aberaeron to the historic mustering point of the drovers at Tregaron, which continues to hold a thriving livestock market to this day.

Although predominantly a rural constituency, we boast two university towns. The university at Aberystwyth was established in 1872, thanks to the pennies of the people—thousands of individual donations from across Wales; and Lampeter is home to the oldest degree-awarding institution in Wales, founded in 1822.

We can also justifiably claim to be the capital of Welsh culture. In addition to housing the National Library of Wales and two universities, Ceredigion has two thriving publishing houses in Talybont and Llandysul, and the recently restored castle in Cardigan played host to the first National Eisteddfod in 1176. The most famous of Welsh bard, Dafydd ap Gwilym, was born in Penrhyncoch, and my hometown of Lampeter is the birthplace of Welsh rugby, with the first recorded match being played there in 1866.

That rich mix of rural and urban defines Ceredigion—a tapestry of communities woven tightly by the emphatic landscape and the famous quick-witted humour of the Cardi.

Although we must speak to our strengths, we cannot be blind to the reality that the uncertainty surrounding our departure from the European Union poses a daunting challenge to the very fabric of our community. During my time in this place, I will strive to ensure that the best interests of the rural economy and higher education are at the forefront of the minds of Government Ministers as they conduct Brexit negotiations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we cannot allow ourselves to be forgotten. Decisions taken in London have long overlooked the rural economy, with public investment too often bypassing the hinterland. For too long, amenities considered essential to the urban economy are dismissed as mere luxuries in more rural areas.

Several of my predecessors in this House have pointed to the tragic irony that Ceredigion bestows upon its youth an unrivalled education, but offers them a paucity of job opportunities and affordable housing. For decades,

our county has lost the potential and the vitality of her youth. Around half her young people leave the county by the time they reach 25 years of age.

Many of the young who have left are Welsh speakers, which has meant that in my lifetime—which, I am sure hon. and right hon. Members will agree, is not particularly long—the percentage of people living in Ceredigion that can speak the language has declined from around 60% to just 47%. This steady, silent haemorrhage saps the life of nearly every town and village the length and breadth of the county.

During my time in this place, I look forward to working with those across the political divide to refocus the Government's attention on the challenges facing rural areas, and to encourage greater efforts at developing our economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are a proud people in Ceredigion, and we possess an historic resolve to buck national trends. We are also of independent spirit—over the years we have seen fit to elect Members to this House from across the political spectrum. I am particularly proud to follow in the footsteps of my distinguished Plaid Cymru predecessors, Simon Thomas and Cynog Dafis. They worked tirelessly for Ceredigion and were passionate about guarding rural areas from the negligence of a remote Government. Twenty-five years after the election of the first Plaid Cymru MP for Ceredigion, I am committed to building on this legacy. It is the greatest of honours to have been entrusted by the people of our county during this critical time. As we come together today to remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives during the first world war, we can all be inspired by their deep sense of duty. It is that sense of duty and service that I will seek to embrace.

I would like to finish by quoting one of Ceredigion's greatest sons and a founding member of Plaid Cymru, Prosser Rhys. He wrote:

“Deued a ddêl, rhaid imi mwy
Sefyll neu syrthio gyda hwy.”

Whether I am faced by opportunities or obstacles, the best interests of my county and my constituents will be at the very heart of all my endeavours. Diolch yn fawr.

4.10 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) for an impressive first speech. I thought his mention of Hedd Wyn, who died at Passchendaele aged 30 was particularly appropriate. It reminds us all of what talent was lost, what futures were lost, and what artistic flourishing could have taken place in this country but for that first war.

I was also pleased that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged his predecessor, Mark Williams, saying that he was held in affection throughout the House. He most certainly was. He was one of those Members who have friends across the political spectrum. People would support him just because he was Mark: the political differences dissolved.

I took exception a little to the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that Ceredigion was the finest place in Wales to go on holiday—Porthcawl is obviously a great seaside town—but I hope that his speech inspired those who were listening to think of Wales for their holiday destination this year, because we have so many beautiful places. We must keep a welcome in our hillsides, no matter whether it is in the north or the south.

One thing is certain. There is not a family in the United Kingdom who will not, over the coming months, be remembering the first world war and the family members who were lost, the futures that were lost, as a result of that war. I have a tiny pocket diary that my grandfather took with him to the front. In it, he made a few comments every day about what he saw. I spent a lot of time tracking what he was talking about, and looking at the experiences that he made a note of. He left for war on 13 August 1914, noting:

“We left Limerick by train for Queenstown, embarked on the SS Matheron of steamers Liverpool.”

When he arrived in Belgium, the new idea of moving soldiers to the front quickly was in play. Off he went on a train journey. He spent many hours, indeed days, on that train, which went into sidings as those in charge tried to get all the trains with all the troops to the front as quickly as possible. On 20 August 1914, they finally arrived in a field, where they disembarked. They had nowhere to sleep: they had no tents and no blankets. They lay down in that field, exhausted by the journeys that had taken place from 13 August to 20 August, and slept.

Before they had a chance to sleep, however, they were addressed by Sir John French, who said:

“Our cause is just. We are called upon to fight beside our gallant allies in France and Belgium in no war of arrogance, but to uphold our national honour, independence and freedom.”

We have violated no neutrality, nor have we been false to any treaties. We enter upon this conflict with the clearest consciousness that we are fighting for right and honour.

Having then this trust in the righteousness of our cause, pride in the glory of our military traditions, and belief in the efficiency of our army, we go forward together to do or die.”

We are still faced with that dilemma. What do we do as a nation when others violate neutrality and are false to the treaties that have been entered into? Do we then prove false to treaties that we have entered into to come to the support and aid of others? That is the dilemma that the House faces every time we have a debate about whether to go to war. In my time in the House, I have taken part in three debates in which we have had to decide whether to commit our personnel and to take that decision. Each time, it is the issue of neutrality and our treaty commitments that we consider. That is the thing that helps us to make our decision.

My grandfather's diary recounts countless days of heavy shellfire, near escapes from death, exhaustion and countless movements, as he survived the battles of Le Cateau and Mons, and the great retreat from Mons and Marne. He then took part in the first battle of Ypres.

In the first battle of Ypres, the British expeditionary force lost 2,368 officers and 55,787 men. The British regular Army virtually disappeared, leaving only a framework for the new mass armies that were to come. The German army lost 130,000 men, the French 50,000 and the Belgian 32,000. Sometimes when I read the diary, I ask myself—what we have learned and what I need to learn as, hopefully to be again, a member of the Select Committee on Defence. In the Select Committee, we have many times looked at reports about equipment. It is one of the Committee's major priorities.

On 17 October 1914, my grandfather noted:

“Very fine morning, all my chums congratulated me on my birthday. We got a blanket served out to us. We have had nothing to cover us since we came out. Severe fighting is going all along the canal”.

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

From August to October, they had no blanket—nothing to cover them, despite the battles that they had fought and survived. There was hardly a man of the original expeditionary force who possessed more than the clothing he stood up in and that was often woefully inadequate. It is no wonder the Defence Committee even today is concerned about equipment, logistics, preparation and planning for war.

On 29 October 1914, my grandfather noted:

“Terrific firing all day and night. The Indian troops came here to relieve us, they look a fine lot of men, Gurkha, Sikhs and Punjabis.”

It reminds us that, even then, alliances, coalitions and interoperability were the way in which wars were fought. We rarely stand alone. In that war, 90,000 Indian soldiers and 50,000 labourers served in two infantry and cavalry divisions.

On 1 November 1914, my grandfather noted:

“Damp morning had to clean our saddles and harnesses.”

My grandfather was a signalman and often rode out to ensure that communications between the trenches and senior military command were clear. He continued:

“This was a quiet day in Beuvry but it was the 23rd day of the First battle of Ypres”.

It was also a time of great destruction and horror for the civilian population living in that area. We have talked a great deal about the impact of the war on our personnel, but it was also a time of great horror for civilian populations, who had no idea of where to flee for security. They had no idea where there was safety, and where a bombardment would not lead to death and destruction. Many people were forced out of their homes.

My town of Porthcawl took in many refugees from Belgium, as did many towns across the United Kingdom. This is also a lesson that we still carry with us today—the importance of refuge, and of offering support to refugees and civilians, who, more often than our military personnel, are the ones who are slaughtered during warfare.

One of the things that happened as a result of the first world war was that we recognised that we needed to take responsibility for how we dealt with war, because in the second battle of Ypres the Germans used poison gas for the first time, and created alarm among the stricken British and French colonial defenders. Chlorine gas was a new experiment, and its success surprised the German commanders, but it also led us to look later at developing a law of armed conflict and international humanitarian law, and at what was going to be acceptable and unacceptable. It is horrifying that we still see the use of chlorine gas and mustard gas in Syria, something we thought we had stopped, and that everyone in this House, no matter of which political party, roundly condemns. It is viewed with the horror with which we viewed its first use back in 1915.

We also read with horror the stories of the impact of that relentless pounding on the mental health of the people who fought and the refugees who traipsed back and forth across the countryside trying to find safety:

“I'll tell you this much, I might not have been wounded in the body but I was wounded in my mind. I don't know if you can imagine it but obviously, when there is shell fire, you get down to get cover, only an idiot wouldn't get down, so you get down and you can't get your nails into the ground and your head under the ground and you can't get down because you can't go any further.

You're on the ground and your nails are dug in the ground and there you are and the shells are bursting around and there's screaming bits of shells and they're not just bits of metal, they're hot metal flying all over the place and there are machine guns going and pandemonium all around. How the devil did you get out of that unscathed? How did you get out? It's a miracle, if there's such a thing as a miracle.”

That was written by Sergeant Bill Hay of the 9th Battalion, and I think it is one of the most graphic descriptions of what it must have been like to have been in that hell.

On Sunday 2 May 1915, my grandfather noted:

“Dull day, we rested to-day. Lots of troops went past suffering from poisoning from the gas. A terrific bombardment commenced about 5 o'clock, the noise is terrible...this is the heaviest bombardment I have heard. I had to go to Vlamertinge at 9 o'clock it was black dark and shells were bursting over my head. It was a terrible experience it being my first night out on the line in black darkness. The roads are full of our chaps suffering from gas poisoning.”

The diary ends on Wednesday 14 July 1915:

“Went and laid a line from signal office to 3rd Corps HQ finished dinner time. There was a very heavy bombardment last night in front of the Durham's trenches between Messines and Ploegsteert. I left Bailleul at 4.38 for England on leave, arrived at Boulogne at 9 pm”.

That is the last we know of my grandfather's day-to-day experiences. He died at the third battle of Ypres. We know that Driver Albert Edward Ironside, No. 17785, died on 22 July 1917. He is buried in plot 1, row F, grave No. 4 in Dozinghem military cemetery in Belgium. The advance dressing stations in the area were humorously named by the troops: Dozinghem, Mendinghem and Bandaghem. The cemeteries that were created perpetuate those names. We do not know when my grandfather was injured or how he died. We were told that he was poisoned by gas. From 10 July 1917, mustard gas was used every night against British positions. The *Glamorgan Gem* contains an article by Ceri Joseph of the Porthcawl Museum, which has been running amazing exhibitions on the first world war over this whole period to explain the local context, the service that the local people gave and the impact of the war on the town. In the article, Ceri suggests that German tactics had changed in that month. They allowed the British to cover an increasing amount of ground in the hope that they would lose momentum. Forward signal parties would often become involved in fighting, and Albert might have been trapped and died fighting.

What lessons can we learn? What knowledge can one man's experience give us? Never again should we send people to war without full preparation and without the kit and equipment that they need. We have done that recently. Members of this House did not want to send anyone into Afghanistan with the wrong equipment, but that is what we did. This is something we must always question before we make these decisions. We have also learned that there are few short wars. All wars have long-term consequences. Those who came back from the first world war had to live with their experiences, as did their families and their communities. That war still resonates with us here and with their families, even today.

The accountability of generals has increased. The Defence Select Committee, and this House, demand to know why mistakes have been made and why certain things have happened. We are better at doing that now, and I believe that we play an honourable role here in that regard. All working men, and married women,

achieved the vote after the war. The Government were frightened that those men, returning from the horrors, armed and experienced, would revolt against them if they did not give them the vote. They got the vote but they still had to face the horrors of the great depression. I should like to end on what is, for me, a positive note. In the first election following the conflict, Labour tripled its vote. Five years later, the party formed a Government for the first time.

4.28 pm

Kevin Brennan: With the leave of the House, I will reply to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. We have had an excellent debate with some extremely good speeches from both sides of the House. The right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) made a knowledgeable and thoughtful contribution and enlightened all of us with his expertise. The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) spoke eloquently, as ever, on behalf of the Scottish National party. We should all thank the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) not only for his speech but for all that he has done to organise the first world war commemorations. He posed the important question: would we pay the price if we knew it in advance? We can never know the answer, for obvious reasons, but we should always consider that point when these decisions are before us in the House of Commons.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who is not in his place, told us of his father's participation in the battles at Passchendaele. He also rightly reminded the House that, although we say that we must, we often do not learn lessons from such conflicts. He also rightly referred to the famous Wilfred Owen poem "Dulce et Decorum Est". We were all moved by the contribution from the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). As ever, he had the House transfixed with his personal and compelling account of the reality of being in a conflict. We thank him for his service to our country as well as for his contribution today.

We have been fortunate to have some wonderful maiden speeches during the course of the debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), who told us of his personal journey from Kashmir to Bedford. I was pleased that he rightly paid tribute to his predecessor Richard Fuller, whom I know from my university days and who was a fine Member of this House. My hon. Friend is clearly proud of his constituency and his constituents have every right to be proud of him, too, for his contribution today.

The hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who is also starring later in our proceedings today, told us a moving personal story from his own family and reminded us of the consequences of the aftermath of war, which we should all remember. He also paid tribute to his father, who is watching our proceedings today. The hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) spoke, as I did, about Hedd Wyn, the Welsh poet who was killed at the battle of Passchendaele. We then had a typically knowledgeable contribution from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chairman of the Defence Committee, who gave us a detailed and vivid portrayal of the futility and horror of the battle. He brought great wisdom and knowledge to our proceedings.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on his excellent maiden speech. When a Member makes a maiden speech, it is customary to say that they have bright future, possibly at the Dispatch Box. It took me six years to get to the Dispatch Box, but my hon. Friend has rather beaten that record since he told us that he will be making his debut just next week. We wish him well in his role, and I am sure that he will do very well indeed. He also mentioned Michael Martin, the previous Speaker. When I was a young new MP in 2002, I had the temerity to ask a question in this House without wearing a tie, and I was rightly admonished by the then Speaker. Times have changed, but I never quite got over that, so I am still wearing my tie despite the new dispensation.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who is another new Member—so new that I thought it might have been his maiden speech until he took an intervention—told us that he has visited the Menin Gate and witnessed the ceremony. He said that all schoolchildren should perhaps do the same, and I think we would all agree. He also referred to the war memorials in his constituency and reminded us of the contribution of Commonwealth troops in the first world war, including those from India. We should remember that 1.3 million people volunteered for the British Indian Army during that war, with 70,000 of them losing their lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) mentioned the events being organised in her constituency to commemorate Passchendaele. She also told us the fascinating story of Walter Marsden, who won the Military Cross at the battle and later sculpted the figure of peace on the war memorial in her constituency.

It was a pleasure to hear the fine maiden speech of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who paid appropriate tribute to his predecessor Mark Williams, who was genuinely liked by Members across the House. He introduced yet another Welsh word into the debate: hiraeth, which means a deep longing for home. He clearly loves his constituency, which he describes as the most beautiful in Wales. I should remind him that it is in fact the murder capital of Wales because, as those of us who occasionally watch it know, the television series "Hinterland" is made in his constituency. Although he has invited us all to visit, we are a bit nervous because the murder rate seems to be particularly high; almost as high as Oxford in "Inspector Morse." He makes his constituency sound like the garden of Eden—I am not suggesting that original sin was invented there—and hon. Members should take up his offer to visit, as it is a very beautiful place. He has a bright future in this place, so long as he never achieves his ambition of Wales leaving the United Kingdom. In that case he would have to give up his seat, and the House would be the poorer.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who told us the poignant story of her grandfather's diary from the front and how she uses it as inspiration for the fine work she does on the Defence Committee. We were all moved immensely by what she told us.

It falls to me to pay tribute, as the Minister and I did at the beginning, to all those who gave their life in the first world war, particularly at the battle of Passchendaele, and to those who still give service to us in our armed forces. Today's debate is a hugely appropriate tribute to

[*Kevin Brennan*]

them. The greatest tribute we can give, as other hon. Members have said, is to do all we can to promote peace. Let us all pledge today to do just that.

4.36 pm

John Glen: This has been an excellent debate that I hope puts the House in good standing with those who are watching. We have had 13 Back-Bench contributions and three excellent maiden speeches. I will not repeat the excellent words of the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who speaks for the Opposition, in going through all of them, but I will mention the three maiden speeches.

First, I pay tribute to the words of the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin). The way he spoke about his predecessor does him great credit. The whole House will be aware of his commitment to Bedford, and we wish him well for his future in the House.

Secondly, I will not say too much to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) about quaking knees and trembling at the Dispatch Box, but it took me seven years to get here. I am pleased that it will only have taken him a few weeks. I wish him well in his career in the House.

Thirdly, I applaud the young hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on his composed and measured first contribution. He describes his constituency very fully as the capital of Welsh culture, which, from what I heard in other contributions today, is a contested title. I wish him well in the House, too.

I am grateful for all the contributions and, as I reflect on them, I will refer to my hon. Friends. As we have heard, the battle of Passchendaele, which touched communities across Britain and Ireland, and across the world, was a grim series of events. It is right that we take this opportunity to reflect on the bravery, endurance, service and sacrifice of those involved. We should particularly remember that conditions and casualties were horrific for soldiers on both sides.

In the spirit of the personal reflections that so many colleagues on both sides of the House have shared, I will read a first-hand account of Passchendaele given to me by my constituent Colonel Newbould, a distinguished battle tours veteran. It said:

“While I and others were taking supplies into the line at Ypres, we waded through mud all the way. It was very necessary to keep following the leader strictly in line, for one false step to the right or left sometimes meant plunging into dangerous and deep mud-pools.

One of our men was unfortunate enough to step out of line and fall into one of these mud-holes. Knowing from past experience that quick action was needed if we were to save him from quickly

sinking, we got hold of his arms and tried to pull him out. This did not produce much result and we had to be careful ourselves not to slip in with him. We finally procured a rope and managed to loop it securely under his armpits.

He was now gradually sinking until the mud and water reached almost to his shoulders. We tugged at that rope with the strength of desperation in an effort to save him, but it was useless. He was fast in the mud and beyond human aid.

Reluctantly, the party had to leave him to his fate, and that fate was gradually sinking inch-by-inch and finally dying of suffocation. The poor fellow now knew he was beyond all aid and begged me to shoot him rather than leave him to die a miserable death by suffocation.

I did not want to do this, but thinking of the agonies he would endure if I left him to this horrible death, I decided a quick death would be a merciful ending. I am not afraid to say therefore that I shot this man at his own most urgent request, thus releasing him from a far more agonising end.”

That is the reality of the human misery that we are commemorating today. It is human misery that my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke of with such personal authority when he said that war is disgusting and horrid. But it is important that we as a nation commemorate what happened, and I wish to remind the House that after these events on 30 and 31 July our focus will be on the centenary of the Armistice in November 2018. I urge Members from across the House to consider the resources available to ensure that their local constituencies engage in the commemorative programme.

Many Heritage Lottery Fund projects are taking place up and down the country, in which local communities are exploring and learning about their first world war heritage. Since April 2010, the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded more than £86 million to more than 1,700 projects covering the whole of the UK to mark the centenary. Some 7 million people have engaged in first world war heritage. As the hon. Member for Cardiff West so rightly said, poetry, songs and arts keep us going. Secondary school students continue to join the battlefield tours, with nearly 1,500 schools taking part so far. The Government want to ensure a lasting legacy of first world war remembrance, and education. After all, we owe it to all those who bravely fought 100 years ago on our behalf. So whether attending events in Belgium or the UK, or watching on television, we will remember all those affected by this dreadful battle 100 years ago and ensure that they shall never be forgotten. It is right that this House remembers all those who made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Commemoration of Passchendaele, the Third Battle of Ypres.

Driving Offences: Private Land

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

4.44 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): On 9 August 2013, a terrible, tragic and preventable accident took place at Swithens farm in my constituency. Eleven-year-old Harry Whitlam died from injuries he sustained after being struck by a reversing farm vehicle. The driver of that vehicle was over twice the legal drink-drive limit, but the Crown Prosecution Service did not bring a prosecution as the accident was deemed to have occurred on private, not public, land.

Harry and his mum, Pamela, live in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), who is on maternity leave and very much regrets that she cannot be here today. Pamela worked in the café kitchen of the working farm, which, like many other farms, has diversified and become a visitor attraction.

Areas of the farm are designated as both private and public, but, at the time of the accident, the boundaries of those areas were not clearly defined. Indeed, the police investigation was clear about the lack of separation between public and private areas. It said:

“Upon approaching the scene from Swithens Lane, there was no signage or other barrier that would restrict public access to the scene, or inform a person entering from that direction that they are in a non-public area of the farm.”

Harry was a regular visitor to the farm, especially during the school holidays when his mum was working there. He regularly assisted the farmhands with their work, particularly in the petting farm and collecting eggs from the chickens. He was a familiar face and well known to the farm staff. There was another young boy, a friend of Harry’s, who helped out in just the same way.

On the morning of the accident, Harry arrived first thing at the farm with his mum. He was keen to meet up with his friend and also lend a hand with building a new wall to help house some new meerkats. He went off for a short while, returning to the café accompanied by one of his farmhand friends and ordered breakfast from his mum that they planned to collect a little later.

Approximately 15 minutes later, the accident occurred. Harry was in the farmyard when he was hit by a slurry trailer being reversed by a tractor. He was badly crushed by one of the large trailer tyres. The Yorkshire air ambulance flew Harry to Leeds General Infirmary, but, despite the best efforts of medical staff, he tragically died from his injuries.

The investigation revealed that Harry had been walking across the back of the slurry trailer from right to left when he was struck. He had gained access to this working area of the farm by a route that was not in any way cordoned off from the public. Indeed, there are public rights of way across the “private” area. There is no evidence that Harry was running, and evidence presented by PC Martin Ward, a collision investigator, confirmed that the view from the cab “was good” and that

“Harry was there to be seen”.

He concluded that Harry would have been in the sight of the driver for “quite a long time” and that it was “a very low impact speed”.

Owing to the anomaly in the law that this debate seeks to address with “Whitlam’s law”, the driver, Mr Gary Green, despite being over twice the drink-drive limit, was only prosecuted under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. As such, the family had to wait some 17 months before the Health and Safety Executive was able to prosecute him for failing to ensure the safety of persons and other employees, contrary to section 3(2) of the 1974 Act.

This makes it sound as though it was nothing more than a tragic accident. The truth is that Gary Green was drunk, and having drunk such a huge quantity of alcohol, he knowingly and willingly took control of heavy machinery and killed a young boy, when all investigations show that if he had been alert he would have stopped his vehicle as Harry was in plain sight.

As this was only an HSE prosecution, Green was sentenced to just 16 months and two weeks in prison. If he had been prosecuted under section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs, the maximum penalty would have been 14 years’ imprisonment. In addition, there is scope for an unlimited fine, a minimum two-year driving ban and a requirement to pass an extended driving test before the offender can drive legally again. The CPS advise that it is probable that had Green been prosecuted under the Road Traffic Act, he would have received a sentence of about six years.

The disparity in the sentencing for the same offence—driving while under the influence of alcohol—is unjust and at odds with a society that widely condemns such behaviour. The CPS reported that it was unable to bring a prosecution as the accident happened on private land; questions have been asked about whether the CPS was instructed to advise an investigation and whether it considered a manslaughter charge. I have been advised that the police thoroughly investigated the matter and manslaughter charges were considered, but, according to the CPS, the case did not pass the test for gross negligence manslaughter.

What I have called Whitlam’s law seeks to make this analysis irrelevant by calling for parity of esteem. There is much confusion, and contradictory prosecutions around the country. In 2010, David John Arthur, 62, tried to convince Truro magistrates that he was not guilty of drink-driving because he was caught in a Tesco Extra supermarket carpark, claiming it was private property and the law did not apply. He was convicted. In 2012, Lisa Docktray, 41, drove from her friend’s caravan to her own at Presthaven Sands holiday park, Gronant. She had an alcohol reading of 102 micrograms compared with the legal limit of 35, and believed she could drive because it was private land. She was found guilty. But in 2012, a priest, Canon Peter Maguire, was double the drink drive limit when he collided with a vehicle in a carpark. His defence was that the carpark was private land and therefore he could not be prosecuted. He was found not guilty on these grounds.

There are law firms that boast of getting around our laws and getting people off. I struggled over whether to name and shame them in the Chamber, but I fear that would only give them free advertising. They seek blatantly to disobey the law and then look for legal loopholes to get away with it. I think the majority of Members

[*Alec Shelbrooke*]

would have rightful contempt for these so-called practitioners of law. The road safety charity Brake has said:

“As a road safety charity we know only too well the devastation and suffering caused by drink driving. A drunk driver in charge of a vehicle, of any type, is a lethal combination. Whether this takes place on public or private land ought to be irrelevant”.

The time has come to say that parity of esteem must exist for road traffic prosecutions as it does if someone kills a person in their own home or on the street. Whitlam’s law is about changing the Road Traffic Act so that offences prescribed by it that are committed on private land are classed as criminal offences and are actionable by the police, particularly the offence of driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, regardless of where that vehicle might be. Whitlam’s law will prevent other families from having to go through Pamela’s trauma of losing her only son and then being told that a prosecution for death by drink-driving could not be brought.

You may remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that a few years ago you were in the Chair when I brought another case to the House—that of a young boy who, a day before his 20th birthday, was killed by a drink driver. How often do people have to come to this Chamber to try to do something about our drink-driving laws and ensure that people are properly prosecuted and that justice is meted out? That would at least bring closure to the family. I ask any parent in this Chamber how they would feel if their only child, their only son, was killed and the immediate reaction was, “We cannot prosecute” even though the driver was drunk and all the investigations showed that he had plenty of time to see the young boy, it was at low-impact speed and the boy was there to be seen?

Harry Whitlam is dead because of a drink-driver, and it shames us all that the driver cannot be prosecuted because of a loophole in the law that some solicitors will exploit to get people off for what is a crime.

I close with a simple but heartbreakingly statement from Pamela:

“I believe there should be no distinction between private or public land if someone is found to be in charge of a motor vehicle whilst under the influence.”

By driving in this state they not only endanger the lives of others, but also put their own lives at risk.

It is a sad fact that some law firms pride themselves in exploiting this legal loophole, using it to get drivers acquitted of drink driving offences.”

It is even more distressing to me when they quote my son’s death as an example of how they can ‘beat’ the system.”

4.55 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who secured this Adjournment debate; he will have moved everyone who heard it today. As he knows, I am the father of two young sons, and I respond to the debate not only as a Minister of the Crown, but in that capacity. We have just been debating Passchendaele; how unfortunate that we should come to the Adjournment only to turn to another tragedy. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing the tale of Harry Whitlam to this Chamber. I offer my heartfelt condolences to the Whitlam family.

Regrettably, motor vehicles are responsible for too many deaths on our roads. Although this country has an enviable road safety record, in 2015 there were 1,750 reported road deaths in Great Britain, with many times that figure seriously injured. Motor vehicles were also responsible for a number of deaths away from the highway. In 2016-17, being struck by a moving vehicle was the cause of 31 deaths of workers, according to statistics compiled under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013. This makes it the leading cause of worker fatality.

Harry Whitlam was a child; he was not a worker in a formal sense, of course, but he was entitled to the same attention from those about him that any worker would have expected, or been entitled to. Our traffic law recognises that the highway can be a dangerous place, and it is based on the premise that motor vehicles will be moving at speed in close proximity to each other and other road users. The offences of careless or dangerous driving have been framed in that context, as my hon. Friend says.

Once we look away from the highway, the range of activities using a vehicle that take place on private land multiply in unimaginable profusion. An activity such as motor racing is designed to demonstrate the skills of motor racing drivers and mechanical engineers in ways that would not be appropriate on an open highway. Workers on a construction site may be controlling vehicles in spaces that they know do not have firm foundations or walls. Drivers who are airside at an airport share the ground with aircraft, with all the concomitant dangers that might bring.

All those drivers of course owe a duty of care to those about them, and that duty comes not from being employees or drivers, but quite straightforwardly from being human beings with a responsibility to their fellows. That can never be greater than when one thinks of young people and children. Our responsibility to take care of those around us must surely be exaggerated in our hearts—must be even greater—when we are speaking about vulnerable people: the very young, the very old, the frail, the disabled and the infirm, and so on. I understand my hon. Friend’s frustration that more is not done.

For more than 40 years, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 has provided a framework for ensuring that workplaces are safe. There is a reporting regime that allows the Health and Safety Executive to monitor shortcomings. Of course, not all private land is a workplace. Indeed, places often serve as both workplace and home. Farms are a prime example.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Mr Hayes: Accidents in residential settings are just as tragic as those elsewhere, so when considering whether to formulate dangerous driving legislation for private land, we certainly need to think more widely than the health and safety legislation as it applies to work. Although we should recognise that the highway is a different environment from private land, we should not lose sight of the similarities. In seeking to address the toll of deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents, the World Bank has been advocating that all countries adopt what is known as a safe systems approach to reducing national road casualties.

In December 2015, my predecessor as a Minister in the Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), published the “British Road Safety Statement”, which, among other policies, set out what we are doing in this country to support the safe systems approach. While this obviously related to the highway, the principles can be applied off the highway just as reasonably and effectively.

A safe systems approach recognises that

“We can never entirely eradicate road collisions because there will always be some degree of human error; when collisions do occur the human body is inherently vulnerable to death or injury; and because of this, we should manage our infrastructure, vehicles and speeds to reduce crash energies”

to levels that do not lead to human injury or death.

In considering how to address the tragedy of off-road vehicle accidents, we would do well to adopt a safe systems approach. This is not to say that the solutions will be the same as those applied to the highway, but the aim of saving lives is the same. All this indicates that it is not straightforward to adjust the existing law to improve vehicle operational safety. Yet, the statistics tell us that we should, and must, aspire to do more to prevent future accidents. Legislation is not the only tool. For example, the Health and Safety Executive already works with trade bodies, including the National Farmers Union, to develop good practice relating to handling farm vehicles. This includes off-road specific factors such as working on uneven ground, steep gradients and using on-board machinery. Those things would not be covered by road traffic regulations, even if they were to apply.

I am conscious of how the law may appear, when the penalty for an illegal action depends on where it happens—that does not seem reasonable, does it?—particularly when it seems not to have regard to the equal severity of its effects. So, I am pleased to tell the House and my hon. Friend that I will consider how we might address the matter, including the possibility of future legislative reform. That may sound like a blithe, easy commitment to be delivered by a future Government. However, it is important that we get the reform right, and that we do not rush and make errors in how we frame that kind of legislation. It is more complicated than it first seems for some of the reasons that I have set out, but that is not a

reason to do nothing. To that end, I invite my hon. Friend to come to my Department to meet me and my officials and talk through how we might proceed.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to hear what my right hon. Friend says, and it will come as a great relief to Pamela and her family that this has been taken so seriously. May I ask whether I could bring Pamela and her solicitor so that they can give their first-hand experience and talk about how this law may be developed?

Mr Hayes: I would be honoured and delighted to meet them, so of course the answer is yes.

I have a reputation for quoting poets, and I usually do so in a light-hearted or jocular fashion, as the Speaker mentioned recently. But sometimes poetry can be applied to the most difficult circumstances, and the poet John Donne said this:

“any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind”. We are all poorer for an untimely loss of the kind my hon. Friend has raised in the House. Of course we are poorer, and of course we hurt when we lose a relative, a friend or a colleague, but we are diminished by any loss, and the tragic loss my hon. Friend described will have moved the hearts, as I said at the outset, of everyone in this Chamber, and of many beyond it who have heard this debate.

I say again that I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of off-road vehicle offences. As I have said in reply to the debate, how we respond will depend on the joint working of a large number of bodies within Government. I am not able today to say exactly how the law will change, but given the short time from the point when this debate was announced, doing otherwise would have indicated that we had not thought this through properly. The implications of any such move will be planned carefully and considered, and we will proceed with certainty as a result of that deliberation. But I tell Members this: we will proceed with the firm intention that tragedies such as Harry Whitlam’s might be prevented in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.7 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Monday 17 July 2017

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[**MR SPEAKER** in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: Before we come to questions to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our congratulations to Britain's Jamie Murray, Jordanne Whiley, and Alfie Hewett and Gordon Reid on their successes respectively in the mixed doubles, the ladies' wheelchair doubles and the men's wheelchair doubles at Wimbledon. I am sure that colleagues will also wish to join me in offering our warmest congratulations to Roger Federer on his record-breaking eighth Wimbledon singles title, the oldest man to win the Wimbledon men's singles trophy in the open era, the oldest man to win a grand slam singles title since Ken Rosewall won in 1972 and the first man to win the Wimbledon title without dropping a set throughout the whole tournament since Björn Borg in 1976. We are celebrating the achievements of a very great man indeed.

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Homelessness

1. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What progress his Department has made on plans to tackle homelessness.

[900501]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): No one should find themselves without a roof over their head. That is why this Government have committed to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and to eliminate it all together by 2027. We are implementing the most ambitious legislative reform in decades, ensuring that more people get the help they need before they face homelessness.

Alex Chalk: Our manifesto makes it clear that rough sleeping is unacceptable, and I am delighted that the Secretary of State shares my view that we should be demanding nothing less than its complete eradication. What is being done not only in England but in Cheltenham to end this stain on our society?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend cares very deeply about this issue and has done a lot in his constituency. I share those concerns and it is one of the reasons why, for example, we announced in our recent manifesto that we

will be piloting the concept of Housing First, which has worked well elsewhere. He will also know that his town of Cheltenham will receive £1 million of our £10 million social impact bond, money that will help the most vulnerable rough sleepers get the help they need.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State talked about homelessness as though it is people living on the street; in my constituency, the council is spending £35 million a year on people living in hostels and temporary accommodation, and there are many other hidden households who are living with another family because they cannot afford a roof over their head. The Secretary of State talks about his ambitious plans, but they do not help people here and now; what is he doing now to make sure that people in Hackney South and Shoreditch, across London and the country can get a roof over their head that is affordable?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady reminds us all that homelessness is much more than about people living on the streets; there are many more families and people affected across the country, including, of course, in London. One thing we are doing that I am sure she will welcome is the announcement in a recent Budget that we will be putting £100 million into low-cost move-on accommodation that will provide at least 2,000 places.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): First Point in my constituency works with many hundreds of my constituents who could be at risk of homelessness. Does my right hon. Friend think that housing associations should be doing more to refer individuals for support if arrears arise? That sometimes happens with larger housing associations, but smaller ones often fall short when it comes to referring constituents for support.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend refers to how we can try to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place, and rightly says that some housing associations do a much better job with these types of referrals when arrears arise. There is also a better role for local authorities, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will certainly help to achieve that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Secretary of State must give some hope of a vision that this Government actually believe in something. And if he believes in one thing, it must be sorting out the social housing market by building homes for people at affordable rents—and good quality ones, too.

Sajid Javid: I know the hon. Gentleman cares passionately about this, but it is worth reminding him that statutory homelessness reached its peak in 2003 and since then has fallen to half that number. But, of course, more needs to be done, and the right type of social homes in the right places have a big role to play.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending the work of YMCA Black Country and its excellent chief executive, Steve Clay, as it works, through its Open Door programme, to persuade more private individuals to open their homes to homeless young people?

Sajid Javid: I will very much join my hon. Friend in commending the work that the YMCA does in his constituency, throughout the Black country and indeed throughout the country. This is a lesson that can be learned by many other areas, and it is exactly the kind of thing we want to look at and see whether we can do more of it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the TV programme “Can’t Pay? We’ll Take It Away!”, in which officers arrive to evict people from their homes. Some of those people do not understand the High Court process and might not have paid their money, but some of them have paid their money and the High Court is unaware of that fact. What can be done to help those people at that last minute before the midnight hour?

Sajid Javid: I agree with my hon. Friend that more should be done in such difficult cases to help those vulnerable people. I know that some councils do a much better job than others in that regard, and I hope that the work we are now doing as a result of the Homelessness Reduction Act will help us to spread that good practice to more councils.

Grenfell Tower Fire: Advice to Landlords

2. **Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab):** What advice his Department has provided to small private landlords since the Grenfell Tower fire. [900502]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The safety of tower block residents is absolutely paramount. We have made our testing process available to private residential owners free of charge. This means that landlords can check the safety of their buildings and take the necessary action to reassure residents that they are safe in their homes.

Mike Kane: The Residential Landlords Association, which is based in my constituency, has raised concerns about the complex and sometimes contradictory guidance being given to private landlords by various bodies, including the Government, on fire safety. What plans does the Secretary of State have to address this matter?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will understand that, in the wake of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, the Government had to move quickly and issue guidance within days. Much of that guidance was continuously updated as we were made aware of new information. I met representatives of the private sector on 6 July, and we are discussing with them what more we can do.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that it was this Government who introduced the requirement for private landlords to fit smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors in private homes, and that we are introducing electrical safety checks as standard later this year? Does he acknowledge that all landlords have an overriding responsibility to make their properties safe for their tenants?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend reminds us that it is the legal responsibility of all landlords, whether in the private or public sector, to ensure that their properties

are safe for all their tenants. I think that he was also implying that, in the wake of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower, we should be looking at what more can be done.

17. [900518] **Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** I am concerned that a survey of social landlords carried out by HouseMark has found that they had little confidence that they would be able to take enforcement action under the Housing Act 2004 to ensure that leaseholders complied with fire safety regulations, including through fitting fire doors, which is obviously essential, given what the Secretary of State has just said about keeping all tenants safe. Will he respond to the request from Nottingham City Council, which is seeking additional powers to enable this to happen?

Sajid Javid: That is an important issue and I will certainly look carefully at that request. It is important that all leaseholders recognise their responsibilities as legal owners of their properties. A number of towers were evacuated in Camden recently and a lot was found to be wrong with the internal fire safety of the buildings, including fire doors that should have been in place but simply were not.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I have pointed out to the mayor of Birmingham that the home in which he lives in Birmingham is in a block that is clad. Does the Department keep a register so that it can push out information to private landlords on what they should be looking for, specifically in relation to cladding?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend will know that the legal owners of the building, be they private landlords or otherwise, will have the best information about what type of cladding may or may not exist. Soon after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, after getting expert opinion, we swiftly issued guidance on how to handle that identification process better.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): Could the Secretary of State be more specific about the financial help that he is going to make available to councils with tower blocks, such as Southwark, which has 174? He has talked about the legal duties of councils to keep their tenants safe, and of course that is very important, but they also have a legal duty to have a balanced budget. Since the Conservatives came into government in 2010, Southwark Council’s budget has nearly halved. Fire improvements such as the installation of sprinklers should not happen at the expense of other improvements that tenants are waiting for; nor should the expense be placed on leaseholders. Will the Secretary of State come up with the £100 million that Southwark needs?

Sajid Javid: We have been very clear to local authorities and housing associations in the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy that they should carry out checks immediately. They should then consult with their local fire and rescue service, and whatever is recommended should absolutely be put in place. Where local authorities cannot afford that, we are happy to talk to them and to provide the support that they need.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): In the five weeks since the Grenfell Tower tragedy, both private and social landlords have met with an array of bewildering and

sometimes contradictory advice. They look to the Department for Communities and Local Government both for technical advice about acceptable specification and for real advice about what the Department will pay for. When is the Secretary of State going to make it clear to those responsible for tower blocks what is the right thing to do and how they will pay for the necessary improvements?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman is right about looking to the Department, among others, for advice. That is one reason why we set up an independent expert panel to provide more of that advice that can be relied on. Secondly, the Government have made their position clear on funding: there is no need to wait. If any necessary work has been identified, local authorities must get on with it, and where they cannot afford it they should approach us.

Housebuilding

3. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the current level of housebuilding. [900503]

11. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the current level of housebuilding. [900512]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The level of housebuilding has not been matched by demand. Radical reform is needed to build new homes now and in the future. Our housing White Paper set out how we intend to do that and turn around a legacy of decades of not building enough homes.

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Gentleman meant it the other way around—that supply had not matched the demand. I think that that is what he meant.

Sajid Javid: I beg your pardon, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Scott Mann: The Secretary of State will be aware that Cornwall recently received £5 million for community-led self-build housing. Does he support neighbourhood plans that look to provide that facility instead of registered social landlord properties, so that Government Members can give people not only the ladder, but the spade, the spirit level and the trowel, too?

Sajid Javid: As you say, Mr Speaker, supply has not met demand, and one way of getting that right is to have more self-build homes. I understand that some 255 people have registered in Cornwall Council's area, and the Homes and Communities Agency is working with Igloo Regeneration to deliver 54 plots at Heartlands for people in Cornwall. Our recent announcement of the home building fund—£3 billion in total—can also help.

Lucy Allan: Telford is a new town that is about to celebrate its 50th anniversary, and it is playing its part in tackling the national housing shortage, so I am delighted that the housing infrastructure fund has been announced

to encourage new build. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the fund will also accept bids for the regeneration and renewal of new town infrastructure?

Sajid Javid: As we have shown in the housing infrastructure fund's prospectus, we have deliberately given infrastructure a broad definition, so we would welcome bids that would support regeneration. She is absolutely right to highlight that infrastructure is often the missing bit where we need new homes, which is exactly why we launched the fund.

15. [900516] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Numbers matter, but so does the quality of new homes. I am sure that the Secretary of State will have seen some of the terrible stories in the national press, and I have seen some awful examples recently in my constituency. Why is it that someone can buy goods in a shop and have powers of redress, but if someone spends a fortune on a new home, they can sometimes struggle for months, if not years, to get what they paid for?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the issue of ensuring that if things go wrong, as they sometimes do, when people buy new homes, owners do get proper redress. Mechanisms are in place, both in the private sector and through statutory means, but the issue needs to be looked at carefully.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could confirm why the number of affordable homes built in the last year fell to the lowest level in 24 years.

Sajid Javid: I can happily tell the hon. Lady that the number of council houses built in the last six years is more than double what was built in the previous 13 years. Council houses offer an important choice to people in terms of affordability. We have seen almost 900,000 homes built since 2010, of which more than 300,000 are affordable homes.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State congratulate Exeter's Labour council on building more council homes and housing association homes in the last 10 years than all the surrounding Conservative districts put together? What more can he do to encourage those rural councils to provide more homes in their market towns and villages, instead of plonking their developments on the edge of cities such as Exeter in unsustainable urban sprawl?

Sajid Javid: I would like to see all councils playing an active role in getting more homes built in their area. It is to be welcomed when councils work with private partners to deliver more homes themselves. To make sure those homes are in the right place, local people should be involved in formulating the local plan and then the neighbourhood plans.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Balancing supply and demand requires successful developers and confident buyers. Will my right hon. Friend bring in the owners of the freeholds, who are making a misery of the lives of people in leasehold houses, and the developers who are trying to put things right? People such as Adriatic, frankly, look like modern-day robbers.

Sajid Javid: I commend my hon. Friend for his work in this area to show up the leasehold abuses that take place, especially when it comes to buying new houses. He will know that we said in the White Paper that we will be bringing forward proposals, and I can confirm to him that we will be doing so very shortly.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The Prime Minister has blamed weak housing policy for the Government doing so badly at the election and, now, a Government official speaking for the Secretary of State said the same thing yesterday, but blaming “selfish” Conservative councils who are not telling the truth about housing needs in their area. Is it not the truth that this is a desperate bid to shift the blame from the Secretary of State, who is failing on all fronts on housing? With affordable housebuilding now at a 24-year low, will he change tack and back Labour’s plan to build 100,000 new genuinely affordable homes? He can even offer it to the Prime Minister, and we will back him to see it through this House.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman wants to know the truth, and the truth is that, when he was Housing Minister at the end of the last Labour Government, housing starts fell to their lowest level in almost 100 years—that is the truth. Since then, new-build housing starts are at a nine-year high. If he supports us on implementing the housing White Paper, we can work together.

Core Cities: Economic Regeneration

4. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What support his Department is giving to the Core Cities to promote economic regeneration. [900504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): All Core Cities have benefited from city deals. Areas covering five Core Cities, including Bristol, have also agreed devolution deals, which provide funding powers and support economic growth for regeneration.

Kerry McCarthy: The Core Cities are responsible not just for 19 million people and a quarter of the UK’s economy but for 29% of our trade exports, yet the Department for Exiting the European Union has not made any approach to the Core Cities to discuss how they can be represented during the Brexit negotiations. Will the Minister have words with his colleagues in that Department and tell them that they really ought to be talking to our cities?

Jake Berry: Looking at the list of Core Cities, I have lived in two and worked in one, so I know a bit about them. All I can say is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has written to all Core Cities that have a mayor to say that he will meet them over the summer.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): We should be proud of the funding for our Core Cities, particularly through the devolution deals, but regeneration in the north also relies on the funding of our non-Core Cities. An important part of that for communities such as Hull has been coastal communities funding. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government remain committed to coastal communities funding?

Jake Berry: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we will of course deliver on our general election manifesto pledge to extend coastal communities funding. I also wish to take the opportunity to thank him for the work he did when he was doing this job; I am all too aware that I am walking in the shoes of a giant.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Devolution, as promoted by the former Chancellor and former Prime Minister, is no doubt dead in the water. Few real powers have been devolved and even less fiscal devolution has taken place. The only constant theme is the year-on-year cuts passed down to our local government base—the very base that should be the foundation on which devolution is built. When will Ministers bring forward a meaningful plan for devolution? When will they address the Treasury push for continued cuts to our local government base?

Jake Berry: Devolution has been one of the great successes of this Government and I have been delighted to welcome Conservative colleagues as our new metro mayors, from James Palmer in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Ben Houchen in the Tees Valley and of course Andy Street in the West Midlands, to Tim Bowles in the West of England. The Labour party talked about devolution for years, but what did Labour do? Absolutely nothing. We are getting on with devolution and we are delivering for every region of this country.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s announcement about the coastal communities fund a moment ago. He will be aware that a major regeneration scheme is being developed by North East Lincolnshire Council, about which I wrote to the Secretary of State a couple of weeks ago. Will the Minister agree to meet me and other representatives from the area so that we can move this forward very quickly?

Jake Berry: Yes.

City Deals

5. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Scottish Government on proposed city deals since 26 June 2017. [900505]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is leading on Scotland’s city deals; he spoke to the Scottish Government as recently as last Thursday. No direct discussions have recently taken place between Ministers from this Department and the Scottish Government on this specific issue, although we would welcome such talks.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for that answer. Interestingly, the Democratic Unionist party managed to get £1 billion out of this Government in just a couple of weeks, yet the remaining city deals for Scotland are still on the table. Will he speak to the Secretary of State for Scotland to get his Government to push these deals along? While he is at it, will he consider the Ayrshire growth deal as well, because there has so far been a failure to have meaningful talks on that?

Jake Berry: On the Ayrshire growth deal, my understanding is that Ministers met Keith Brown MSP and local partners from Ayrshire in January and again in April to discuss the priorities for it. I would have thought that Scottish National party Members would welcome the fact that more than half a billion pounds went to Glasgow for its city deal, and that £53 million went to Inverness and the highlands and £125 million went to Aberdeen for theirs. Why do SNP Members not get behind their own cities and city deals, rather than sniping from the sidelines?

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Ashover in my constituency is being blighted by planning applications that we believe are inappropriate, despite our trying to put a neighbourhood plan in place, as the council had not put in place a local plan in time. Will the Minister be willing to meet me to talk about the challenge that Ashover is experiencing, as he will perhaps be able to offer some advice about a village caught between a rock and a hard place?

Jake Berry: It is for my hon. Friend to have a meeting with the housing Minister, who I am sure will be happy to have such a meeting.

Mr Speaker: It was not altogether to do with city deals, but nevertheless the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) has plunged his feet into the water. We appreciate that and wish him well in further contributions in the House.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Not too far from the Scottish city deals are the great prospects for one in Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State was kind enough to meet us just prior to the election, and since the election we now have an agreement that we will bring forward city deals for Northern Ireland. May I ask the Minister to engage as soon as possible ministerially, so that we can make sure we get the best deal for Belfast and our city regions?

Jake Berry: We have already engaged with Belfast on the city deals and we look forward to working together to ensure that we can deliver on their promise. City deals for Northern Ireland are long overdue. They have succeeded in England, in Scotland and in Wales; now it is Northern Ireland's turn, and we look forward to it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The reality is that the deal with the DUP has seen Northern Ireland get £1 billion, which is more than all of Scotland's city deals so far put together. The Edinburgh and south-east Scotland city regional deal has been delayed and the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, Keith Brown, has had meetings cancelled at late notice by the UK Government. Will the Minister confirm whether the UK Government take Scottish city deals seriously and will he meet the ambition of the Ayrshire growth deal, the Tay cities deal and the Stirling deal?

Jake Berry: We absolutely take the entirety of Scotland's ambitious plans very seriously. That is why, as I said earlier, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is leading on this important policy. If the hon. Lady thinks that I or my Department can do something more, she must let me know.

Alison Thewliss: The city deals so far have seen Scottish cities' plans short-changed by the UK Government. The Scottish Government have put in far more than the UK Government have sought to find. If money can be found for Northern Ireland—if £1 billion can appear overnight—how long will Scottish cities have to wait before they get their money?

Jake Berry: All the Scottish cities agreed the city deals mutually with the Government. Some £523 million has gone to Glasgow, £53 million to Inverness and Highland, £125 million to the Aberdeen region and, with a deal for Edinburgh and other deals on the table, I do not think the hon. Lady will have to wait too long.

Homelessness

6. **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of homeless people sleeping rough between 2010 and 2016.

[900506]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Nobody should ever have to sleep rough. My Department co-funded Crisis's recent Housing First report, which shows how that approach can work to end rough sleeping for those with the most complex needs. We are now considering how Housing First can help our manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by 2027.

Ellie Reeves: Official figures released by the Minister's Department continue to show year-on-year increases in the number of rough sleepers since 2010, including a 3% increase in London alone in the past year. Rough sleeping is often linked to mental health issues, so what specific steps will his Department take during this Parliament to address the mental health crisis among rough sleepers?

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for that question and welcome her to the House. A number of underlying issues keep people on the streets when they are rough sleeping, and they certainly include mental health issues. Let me give her some insight into what is happening in her constituency: there is a social impact bond focusing on getting people with underlying mental health issues off the streets. I hope that she welcomes that.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): In my constituency, homelessness is raised with me regularly already. Will my hon. Friend lay out the progress with the Government's homelessness reduction taskforce so that I can allay some of those concerns?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and welcome him to the House. He is right that the Government are setting up a homelessness reduction taskforce in addition to the measures in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the homelessness prevention trailblazers being run by the Government as a forerunner to the Act's coming into effect. The culture is now starting to change and councils are starting to help people far earlier as a result of the trailblazers in areas where they are taking place.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Rough sleeping in Plymouth is on the increase and large numbers of those who are sleeping rough served our country in the armed forces; they are veterans. What discussions has the Minister had with the Ministry of Defence about increasing the amount of funding going into support for rough sleeping veterans so that we can give all our veterans a decent home?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman mentions a critical area and it is vital that we support veterans who are rough sleeping. I run a cross-party working group attended by a number of Ministers, including one from the Ministry of Defence, and this is certainly a subject that we are eagerly trying to address.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): We have heard about mental health issues and veteran issues, but does the Minister agree that another huge problem is addiction to both alcohol and drugs? What is he doing in that area?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a perceptive point. The use of drugs, particularly psychoactive substances such as Spice, which seems to be prevalent among rough sleepers, is having a very detrimental effect on getting people off the street. She will have heard that last week the Home Office launched a drug strategy, and we are working closely with it on that because we realise how critical that is in dealing with the underlying issues and making sure that we can help people off the streets.

Grenfell Tower Fire

7. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): By what date all those who have lost their homes as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire will be permanently re-housed.

[900508]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I can confirm that the first new permanent homes will be available very shortly, and more are being secured, either in Kensington and Chelsea or very close by. In the meantime, good-quality, fully furnished temporary accommodation in the local area has been offered to every family.

Emma Dent Coad: I am sorry; I am not too sure about the formalities of this. In some cases, people are refusing homes because one single unsuitable offer has been made to them. That is absolutely true. I am dealing with casework daily, and I am amazed that only 22 households have been matched with temporary accommodation; four have moved in. What on earth is going on? There are empty homes all across the borough, and they are still not being taken up. People are being offered unsuitable homes. Could the Secretary of State please say what is happening here?

Sajid Javid: First of all, I can tell the hon. Lady that over 220 temporary homes have been identified and inspected—that is all good-quality, available accommodation. She referred to unsuitable offers; she should certainly bring those details to me, and we will look at them and take this very seriously. There are 169 families who have received offers; 30 offers of temporary accommodation have been accepted, and

nine families have already moved in. As she knows full well from talking to her constituents, many families do not feel ready to move into temporary accommodation, and we will absolutely respect their wishes.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can any of the costs be met by the landlords' insurance?

Sajid Javid: That may well be the case further down the line, but right now, the absolute priority is to do whatever is necessary to help the victims of the Grenfell Tower tragedy to get into those homes. All those costs will be met by Government wherever necessary.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Is it not absolutely crucial that we increase the amount of social housing available in Kensington and Chelsea? The Government have announced that 68 properties provided by Berkeley will be made available as social housing. Is it not true that negotiations were under way to provide those homes as social housing under a section 106 agreement before the Grenfell fire? So where are the extra new homes coming from?

Sajid Javid: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's re-election as Chair of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government. I agree that we want more social homes—and not just in Kensington and Chelsea; we want to make sure that that choice is offered across the country. With regard to the 68 homes in the Kensington Row development, to which I think he was referring, my understanding was that they were originally planned to be affordable homes, not social homes, so they will be additional. Despite that, given what has happened and the need for social homes in Kensington and Chelsea, we should do more.

Supported Housing: Funding

8. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): When he plans to publish his Department's response to the consultation on funding for supported housing. [900509]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Developing a sustainable funding model for supported housing is a priority. We welcome the input into our recent consultation. We are now carefully taking stock of the joint report by the Communities and Local Government Committee and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions on supported housing, and we will set out further details of our plans in the autumn.

Jessica Morden: There are 38,500 people in supported accommodation in Wales, and landlords say that decisions about future developments are being delayed due to uncertainty about future funding. Will the Minister confirm that any proposals, devolved or not, will properly fund current and future needs in Wales, especially given Wales's ageing population?

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Nobody is under any illusions about how important supported housing and its provision are to all our constituents. That is why we have confirmed that we will exempt supported housing from the local housing allowance cap until 2019, by which time we will come forward with

a suitable solution. As I say, we are looking to bring forward our plans in the autumn, and we are taking our time to make sure that those plans work and are right, so that we bring forward that supply of supported housing. In England, we are putting £400 million in capital funding behind that, to bring forward new units.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will my hon. Friend update the House on what more is being done to support the victims of domestic abuse in supported housing?

Mr Jones: Domestic abuse is a critical issue across the country. We want to eradicate it, but we must understand that we need to provide safe refuge provision for people who do end up in that very difficult position. We announced earlier this year that we are supporting 76 projects to create 2,200 bed spaces to support 19,000 victims across the country.

Local Authorities: Financial Support

9. Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with local authority leaders on financial support for local authorities since the Government announced their policy on the 100% business rates retention. [900510]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): The Government are committed to delivering the manifesto pledge to continue to give local authorities greater control over the money they raise. We will open a conversation with local government over the next few months about the best way to achieve this.

Imran Hussain: Plans for the 100% retention of business rates fell at the general election and were not introduced in the Queen's Speech. Will the Minister explain whether the Government still plan to legislate for 100% retention? What should already cash-strapped local authorities do in the interim as the revenue support grant is phased out?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. As I said, the Government are committed to delivering our manifesto pledge to give local authorities greater control over the money they raise. To give councils certainty, we have given an unprecedented four-year settlement, which 97% of local authorities have taken up. That does not end until 2019-20, during which time we will bring forward further proposals, which we will work with local government to achieve.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): If Barnet got the same Government support as Camden, it would probably be a realistic option for Barnet to reduce council tax to zero. Will the Minister look at the allocation of funding between outer and inner London to give boroughs such as Barnet a fairer share of resources?

Mr Jones: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. After more than 10 years without the funding formula being looked at, many areas across the country feel a number of challenges, with demographic and service pressures that are encountered more in some places than in others. I assure her that we will look at these matters carefully through the fair funding review.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Before the election, the Government had a plan and a timetable for business rates retention. We know the revenue support grant is going in 2020. In the absence of legislation in the Queen's Speech, I have asked the Government five times how they will introduce measures to fill the financial black hole. Can I assume from the Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) that the previous measures in the Local Government Finance Bill, and the timetable, have now been ditched? Will he now give absolute certainty to local councils? What precisely will be in place by 2020 when the RSG goes?

Mr Jones: I think this is the sixth time that I have answered the hon. Gentleman's question; his question has been put with a considerable amount of faux rage each time, although it is an important issue. I say to him again that we are absolutely committed to what we said in our manifesto: we will give local authorities greater control over the money they raise. When his Government were in power, they only ever gave local authorities a year's certainty—a one-year settlement. We have given a four-year settlement, which 97% of councils have taken up. That enables us to have time to bring forward a sensible solution that works for local government, and we will work with local government to deliver that.

Housebuilding

10. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the building of high-quality, high-density housing. [900511]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In February's housing White Paper, the Government set out a plan for high-quality, high-density housing. The Government plan to implement this through changes to the national planning policy framework later this year.

Neil Parish: Our Conservative manifesto committed to supporting new high-quality housing "like mansion blocks, mews houses and terraced streets." How are the Government working to fulfil this promise and to build housing that is attractive, dense and popular with the public?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right: it is about not just the quantity of housing, but the quality too. That is why, for example, getting local people engaged in neighbourhood plans is so important, and it is why we will be bringing forward the changes that we set out in the housing White Paper.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I asked the former Housing Minister back in April what the Government were doing to protect homeowners following the bogus homes scandal, which saw people spending significant sums, only to find that properties were unfinished, that basic plumbing was not working and that wiring was left unsafe. That was not a unique problem: Shelter has found that half of all new build buyers report a major problem on moving in. The former Minister said that an announcement was imminent, but there was nothing in the Conservative manifesto, the Queen's Speech or the Secretary of State's response to my hon.

Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) earlier. When will the Government act to protect buyers of new build properties?

Sajid Javid: Of course it is very important—we had a similar question earlier—to make sure that people buying new properties get exactly what they believed they were purchasing and, where that is not the case, that they receive help in putting things right. There are already procedures in place, and we are looking to see what more can be done.

Private Rented Sector

12. **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of borough-wide licensing schemes for private rented sector landlords on standards and safety in that sector. [900513]

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): Licensing can be an effective tool where it is targeted at delivering improved standards and safety in the private rented sector for areas suffering from serious problems. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, in April 2015 further conditions for applying selective licensing were introduced.

Stephen Timms: Newham Council introduced the first borough-wide private rented sector licensing in 2013. Last week, the council applied to renew the scheme for a further five years. It has been very successful, enabling the council, working with agencies such as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, to concentrate resources on the small number of private landlords causing problems. Some 81% of Newham residents say it has been effective. Can the Minister reassure me that renewal of the scheme will get the go-ahead?

Alok Sharma: I can certainly reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the scheme will be considered on its merits and in accordance with whether it meets the strategy requirements in part 3 of the Housing Act 2004, which was, of course, introduced under a Labour Government.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In Bath, we have a high number of family homes that have been turned into student accommodation, often with very low housing standards, and students take them up because they have no choice. In the light of the Grenfell disaster, will the Minister ensure that student safety is protected, by encouraging councils to include compulsory electrical safety checks as part of these licensing schemes?

Alok Sharma: We want all landlords, whether they provide student accommodation or otherwise, to keep their tenants safe. As the hon. Lady will know, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at issues related to electrical safety.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The private rented sector has the poorest quality housing in my constituency. It is unregulated, and it needs looking at. I would very much welcome Manchester having a borough-wide licensing scheme like the one in Newham. I ask Ministers to take this issue very seriously, before we see safety concerns in the private rented sector as well.

Alok Sharma: If Manchester, or indeed any other area, wants to come forward with such proposals, they should make them known to the DCLG, and we will look at them on their merits.

Waste Collection

13. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on ensuring that local councils meet legislative requirements on waste collection. [900514]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): There is close collaboration between my Department and Ministers at DEFRA on waste collection issues. Ultimately, it is for local councils to determine when collections take place, but in doing so I would strongly urge them to consider the wishes of local people.

Chris Davies: Prior to the recent local elections, and against the wishes of local people, Powys County Council took the decision to reduce waste collection from fortnightly to three-weekly. What more can my hon. Friend do to ensure that local people's views are taken into account on waste issues to prevent potential health hazards?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend has been a champion in the House on this issue. As he knows, it is a devolved matter in Wales. Ultimately, it is for local councils to decide on the frequency of collections. In England, we have done a great deal to proactively support councils to respond to the wishes of local people on this issue. I would say to my hon. Friend that this is the service people associate most with their local council, and the council should be mindful of the fact that local people should certainly be consulted before any changes are made.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Rather than lecturing councils about their legislative requirements, would the Minister like to come up to Barrow and Furness—or so many other councils, particularly across the north of England—to see the scale of the cuts that these councils are having to implement and the near impossibility of being able to balance a budget in these situations, and provide more help?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman highlights the mess that the public finances were left in when the Labour party left government in 2010, and this Government have been picking up the pieces of that for the past seven years. Unlike Labour, we have given a four-year settlement to local authorities—97% of authorities have taken that up—to give them more space and time to plan to change services to reflect the changing financial environment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late, but I want to take one last question from a new Member—Darren Jones.

New Homes for Social Rent

14. Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the trend in the number of new homes available for social rent since 2010. [900515]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. Since 2010 we have delivered nearly 330,000 affordable homes, including over 120,000 homes for social rent. Our priorities are to boost housing supply and to build more affordable homes to rent and to buy.

Darren Jones: Tens of thousands of Bristolians are waiting for a council house and many more are stuck in expensive, insecure and inadequate private sector housing. Many of these tenants are young families who feel disempowered and stuck in a system that does not care. Will the Secretary of State visit my constituency in Bristol to see at first hand how his supposed radical reform is failing my constituents who are in often damp, inadequate and insecure housing?

Sajid Javid: We set out in our manifesto—again, I talked about this very recently at the Local Government Association conference—our ambition to help local authorities that have ambitions to build more council homes, so if that is what Bristol wants, then the Mayor of Bristol should approach me.

Topical Questions

T1. [900526] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The ongoing response to the Grenfell tragedy has understandably dominated my Department's work for the past few weeks, and it will remain a priority in the months and years ahead, but we have not let up on our wider work. We have launched our £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund, we have introduced the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill, and later this week we will set out further details on our plan to get more homes built in the right places.

Mr Speaker: I see that the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) has beetled away from his seat and looks as though he is about to exit the Chamber. I would have called him at topical questions if he were standing, but I will not if he is not. Anyway, he has got the public information announcement, for which I am sure he is duly grateful.

Sir Edward Leigh: As you know, Mr Speaker, in Lincolnshire we have some wonderful coastal resorts. They trip off the tongue as a litany of sun and fun: Cleethorpes, Mablethorpe, Skegness. Indeed, Mr Speaker, when you go on your holidays on Thursday, do not go to Italy and France—come to bracing Skegness. Can my right hon. Friend promise to use the coastal communities fund to promote all-round tourism and, after Brexit, match the £143 million we receive from the European regional development fund for these resorts?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the importance of all our coastal communities, including, of course, those in Lincolnshire, many of which I had the pleasure of visiting during the recent general election campaign. I can assure him that we continue to use the coastal communities fund, and whatever other resources we have available, to help promote those areas.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with the Conservative leader of Warwickshire County Council, who also leads on community welfare for the Local Government Association, that fining councils and withholding money for delayed discharges will exacerbate the social care crisis, and has he spoken to the Health Secretary about these plans?

Sajid Javid: Of course I have spoken to the Health Secretary, and indeed I spoke to the leader of Warwickshire County Council only last week. I think there is a very broad understanding that with regard to combating and reducing delayed transfers of care, there is a role to play for local authorities and for the NHS.

T3. [900528] Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Plymouth is leading the way on innovation in social care. The work between the local authority and care provider has broken new ground. What more can the Government do to support local authorities that are working so hard to meet social care needs in places such as Plymouth?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am pleased to hear about the good work in Plymouth. My Department works closely with the Department of Health to promote joined-up working across health and social care, including capturing good examples of innovation across the country, through the better care fund.

T2. [900527] Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): More than 50% of fires in people's homes have an electrical source of ignition, and the Department set up a working group last August to look at electrical safety in the private rented sector. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and others, including London Fire Brigade, Electrical Safety First and Shelter, that it is time for a more preventive approach to electrical fires, and that mandatory five-year electrical safety tests should be introduced as a matter of urgency in the private rented sector?

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): As the hon. Lady may be aware, a working group within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at precisely those matters. In the light of the Grenfell fire, the Prime Minister has made it clear that it should bring forward its work and recommendations.

T4. [900529] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Guinness Partnership is reviewing fire safety measures in its three high-rise buildings in Havant. If it concludes that new sprinklers are required, will the Minister join me in calling on private landlords to take responsibility and meet the cost of installing those sprinklers?

Alok Sharma: Obviously, the Guinness Partnership will need to determine, with the local fire service, what is needed to keep those properties safe. As the Secretary of State has made absolutely clear, where work is necessary to ensure the fire safety of social housing, a lack of resources should not prevent it from going ahead.

T9. [900534] **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Nottingham Community Housing Association, which has been recognised by the Almshouse Association for its refurbishment of the William Woodsend memorial homes in my constituency? Will he also listen to NCHA and give it the certainty to enable future investment by dropping his plans to cut housing benefit for supported and sheltered tenants?

Sajid Javid: I join the hon. Lady in commending Nottingham Community Housing Association and so many other housing associations across the country on their work. I think that the housing association sector welcomes our provision of record funding and of new flexibility so that it can do more of what it does.

T5. [900530] **Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps has the Department taken to provide safe and legal spaces in which Travellers can reside, instead of them having to go on really nice green spaces in Oakwood in Derbyshire, which they leave in a terrible mess?

Alok Sharma: I know from my own constituency that unauthorised encampments can cause distress for local communities. The Government are absolutely committed to reducing the number of unauthorised sites by providing affordable, good-quality accommodation for Travellers.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Will the inquiry into electoral conduct take full cognisance of the superb all-party report written by the previous Deputy Speaker, Natascha Engel, which has, sadly, been rebuffed by successive leaders of parties on both sides of the House?

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the inquiry, which was announced by the Prime Minister and will be led by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, should take account of all information. We heard during last week's debate how many hon. Members and candidates suffered racism and other forms of abuse during the general election. I also suffered that. I am sure that everyone in this House agrees that racism has no place in our society.

T6. [900531] **Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): What is the current status of the Devon and Somerset devolution bid? Do they still need to have a directly elected mayor to get the full devolution package, and will the Minister please meet the leaders of Devon and Somerset councils and me this autumn to discuss the way forward?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Our manifesto makes it clear that there will be no requirement for mayors in rural counties. Devon and Somerset have not to date submitted any combined authority proposals, but I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and his council leader in due course.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): A growing number of Grenfell survivors are being placed in budget hotels in my constituency as the central London hotels fill up for the tourist season. Despite their being unsuitable for long stays, especially for young families, they are being booked by the month. That gives the lie to the argument that the Government have suitable accommodation ready—not temporary or unsuitable, but permanent accommodation. Will the Secretary of State ask Kensington and Chelsea to use some of the £274 million in its reserves to buy a couple of hundred homes and make sure that those people have decent houses?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that money is not the issue. We have already made it absolutely clear that we will do whatever it takes to find the victims of Grenfell Tower permanent homes. That is exactly what we are doing, but we will be led by the victims themselves, at their pace, on what they need.

T7. [900532] **Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): Overton, Oakley and Whitchurch in my constituency have produced really ambitious neighbourhood plans with generous housing targets, but those communities are now concerned about the infrastructure investment required to make the housing developments happen. What can the Minister do to help?

Alok Sharma: I commend my hon. Friend's constituents for putting together neighbourhood plans—a great innovation that this Government introduced. In terms of infrastructure, I encourage him to get his local planning authorities to bid for the £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced earlier this month.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): When I was growing up, I had the security of the roof of a council flat over my head. I wonder what the Secretary of State would say to the 11-year-old boy in my constituency who pulled me aside after a classroom visit just last week because he, his mother and his two siblings are living in one room in a hostel, as they have been for more than a year. What message does the Secretary of State have for such children in my constituency who no longer have the security of a decent place to live?

Sajid Javid: My message is that successive Governments have not built enough homes of all types, and, if we are going to do that, we should all unite around the housing White Paper.

T8. [900533] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in commending excellent Cheltenham homeless charities Cheltenham Open Door and P3 for their compassionate and, above all, early intervention, which is turning lives around in my constituency?

Mr Marcus Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the excellent work that is being done by the charities that he mentions in Cheltenham. Early intervention is absolutely critical. That is why doing things earlier to prevent people from becoming homeless is the bedrock of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. Already, through the homelessness prevention trailblazers that were the forerunners of that Act, the culture among the local authorities involved is definitely changing towards prevention.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I have regularly raised my concerns about the safety of the rapid conversion of family homes in my constituency into houses in multiple occupation. In view of the Grenfell disaster, do the Government have any plans to issue new guidance to local planning authorities, particularly about the safety of such conversions?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that. There are many lessons to learn from the Grenfell tragedy, some of which will come from the public inquiry. The expert panel on fire safety has already made recommendations, and if they recommend anything urgent, we will implement it. I am also looking to see what more we can do regarding building regulations and enforcement.

T10. [900535] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What changes to the national planning policy framework are planned to implement the Conservative manifesto commitment to strengthen protection for ancient woodlands?

Sajid Javid: We will be bringing forward proposals very shortly to implement what is in the housing White Paper, under which ancient woodland will receive the same protection as green belt.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the northern powerhouse, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), for visiting New Ferry in my constituency, where the House will remember there was recently a terrible explosion. As a result of that meeting, the leader of the council in Wirral, Phil Davies, has written to the Minister. May I ask him to expedite a reply to that letter?

Jake Berry: No one could visit the scene of the disaster in New Ferry and talk to the residents without realising the seriousness of the explosion that took place some months ago. Following my meeting, I received a letter from Phil Davies. A response will be going out later today, dealing with the queries he raised.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can the Secretary of State tell me what he will do to ensure that Bradford Council builds on the brownfield sites that it has identified before it starts concreting over and building on greenfield sites in the green belt in my constituency?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. As we made clear in the housing White Paper, we expect brownfield sites always to be the priority to meet our housing need. That is certainly what I would expect to see from Bradford.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It was not entirely wise for the Minister for the northern powerhouse last Monday to come across the Pennines from his Lancashire constituency and tell the people of Yorkshire that, in his words, they could not have “full Yorkshire devolution”. Are not those decisions best made in God’s own county, not in Whitehall and certainly not in Lancashire, with its very different geography and the dominance of Manchester and Liverpool?

Jake Berry: As a proud Lancastrian, it is not for me, nor is it for Government, to tell Yorkshire what devolution deal it should have. However, I gently point out that

in 2015, Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield asked for powers from the Government and we gave them to them; they asked for new money from the Government and we gave it to them; and they asked to have an election next May and we gave it to them. When will the people of south Yorkshire learn to take yes for an answer?

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering Borough Council, of which I am a member, provides specialist housing advice to those in financial difficulties to prevent homelessness in the first place. It is working closely with local housing associations to bring forward a record number of new homes for social rent. Is that not exactly the right approach?

Mr Marcus Jones: I commend the work that Kettering Borough Council is doing. In my experience, where a local authority is preventing homelessness, it is doing very much those types of things, particularly helping people to deal with financial challenges through things such as budgeting. It is certainly good to hear that Kettering is bringing forward a significant number of affordable homes that residents in Kettering will benefit from.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): We heard earlier from the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) about coastal communities, but Dawdon, Easington Colliery, Blackhall and Horden in my constituency are also former coalfield communities that have suffered terrible levels of under-investment since the pits were closed under a previous Tory Government. Will the Minister meet me and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust to see what can be done to address those problems?

Jake Berry: It is not just for the Government to support our coastal communities. I encourage all Members across the House to visit the fantastic Great British coastline. I will, of course, happily meet the hon. Gentleman and representatives of his constituency to work out what more the coastal communities fund can do for him.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): In my Cheadle constituency, Woodford neighbourhood forum is drawing up its local plan. However, there are concerns that the Greater Manchester spatial framework will override it. What assurances can my hon. Friend give neighbourhood forums that their plans will be given appropriate consideration?

Alok Sharma: As the Secretary of State reiterated, we made a commitment in the housing White Paper to protect the green belt. I cannot comment specifically on the plans my hon. Friend talks about, but I emphasise that plan makers need to consult their communities, especially in neighbourhood forums. Once a neighbourhood plan has been brought into force, it is part of the strategic development plan of an area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the points of order because there are a number today relating to one matter that seems to me to contain a degree of urgency, so I will treat of it very soon. Just before I do, I have a short statement to make myself.

Speaker's Statement

3.38 pm

Mr Speaker: On Thursday 13 July, the text of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill was available through a tweet before the Bill was presented in the House. Points of order were raised about the Bill being available online before it was available to Members. An immediate investigation was carried out.

A flaw in the publishing process within the House of Commons service meant that the Bill text was inadvertently available on a live parliamentary web server before the Bill was presented. A link to the text was circulated on social media just before 11 am. Immediate action has been taken to amend the publishing process to ensure that this cannot happen again. No one outside the House of Commons service bears any responsibility for this mistake.

This was a serious incident and I have been assured that the required changes have been made to strengthen the Bill publishing arrangements. I hope that that assuages the concern of right hon. and hon. Members.

Points of Order

3.39 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your advice on the urgent matter of the HS2 route and the announcements due to be made by the Transport Secretary, which will affect millions of people? The Secretary of State began his consultation with an oral statement last November, and there had been an expectation that he would announce his final decisions today in an oral statement; indeed, parts of the media were briefed to that effect. All the indications now are that the news will be sneaked out in a written statement any time now. This is a gross courtesy and adds insult to injury for my constituents. I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, about how we can get the Transport Secretary to come to the House and show some accountability on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As others wish to raise points of order relating to the same subject, I will take them—or at least a number of them—and then respond.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice, because today the Government have announced—they have certainly been all over the airwaves—£6.6 billion of contracts on HS2. When such a large amount of taxpayers' money is being spent, it seems to me that the Minister should come to the House and make a statement. I appreciate that the urgent question, the statement and the business on the Order Paper today are equally important, but I wonder whether you could extend the sitting of the House, Mr Speaker, and allow us to have a statement from the Minister, in the light of what has happened with contractors before, CH2M having withdrawn from a £17 million contract because of a lack of due diligence and conflicts of interest. We need to look at these contractors, because one contractor has major project overruns and has written off millions of pounds, two contractors have pulled out of other public service contracts and one is having financial problems and restructuring. I would therefore seek a statement urgently from the Minister.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Further to the point of order raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), Mr Speaker. I would add that it is not just his constituents but voters across South Yorkshire and beyond who are affected by the decisions related to HS2. Not only that, but this is the latest in a long line of actions by the Government who are demonstrating an unwillingness to make themselves properly available for scrutiny by the House. I wonder what you can do, Mr Speaker, to improve the situation and encourage the Government to stand up and do their job properly.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. On the Order Paper today we have the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill, which, as it points out, relates to Fradley Wood in Staffordshire, in my constituency. I have two farms on which it was announced there will be quarrying, and that is before we have even had First Reading. I have

elderly residents who are being told that their homes will be taken away from them. We have already heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) about cost overruns. I too, sadly, think it is outrageous that this major item of public expenditure, which is affecting my constituents and those of many others, is not being reflected by a statement here today.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am saving the right hon. Gentleman up. He is too precious to waste at an early point in our proceedings.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Further to the point of order raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), which I entirely support, Mr Speaker. This is a major announcement affecting my constituency and many others. It is not an HS2 recommendation; it is a Government decision on a previous recommendation. The Government have always come to the House before with an oral statement. While we can ask for an urgent question tomorrow, by that time there will have been public debate on the matter. This House should have the first opportunity to debate it.

Sir Kevin Barron: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Many of my constituents have taken part in the consultation on the re-routing of HS2, over many months now, and we do not know if their voices have been heard. There has been no publication of the consultation, and we are now threatened with a decision that is going to wreck over 100 homes in my constituency and many jobs, with different employers. It is absolutely outrageous that my constituents have been treated with contempt by Ministers, who are not prepared to come to this House, tell us what they have spent all the money on and come to logical decisions on this matter, as opposed to hiding behind making a written statement, we think sometime today.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, because you have already allocated an Adjournment debate to two colleagues—my right hon. Friends the Members for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron)—and because you have heard us, and me in particular, say it, this possibly £80 billion scheme means that a lot of houses in my constituency are going to be demolished; that roads are going to go straight through a development that has only just taken place; and that in Derbyshire there will be a slow track, dawdling its way to Sheffield and beyond, and then a fast track going to Meadowhall. This is a very important matter, and it should be debated at length, because it is going to cost the taxpayer a small fortune. As you know, Mr Speaker, the Sheffield line could be electrified all the way to London, and the trains could get to London a lot more quickly for a lot less money.

This is an outrage, and that is why I have raised the matter today, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their points of order. What I will say in response is this.

First, my understanding is that the written ministerial statement has now been issued. There was some speculation on when it would be issued, and I am advised that it has been. Secondly, I am not in a position to require a Minister to come to the House today to make a statement; however, it is comparatively unusual for Members on both sides of the House, in unison, to raise such a concern, and to make, to all intents and purposes, exactly similar requests for a statement.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Gentleman.

In the circumstances, the Secretary of State is bound to hear of these concerns within a matter of minutes. If the right hon. Gentleman wanted to come to the House today to make a statement, I would certainly be very happy to facilitate him.

Finally, the hon. Member for Sheffield—

Mr Betts: South East.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)—the former hon. Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe—said that an urgent question could be applied for tomorrow, but by then all sorts of briefing would have taken place. I am afraid it is not within the power of the Speaker to reverse time. I cannot do anything about that; I can only deal with the situation as it evolves. What I will say, however, is that if no statement is forthcoming from the Minister, it will be perfectly open to Members to do their best to secure parliamentary time and attention tomorrow. It may be that such an exploration would take place at some length, and it may be that, faced with such a scenario, a Minister might think it prudent and judicious to anticipate the difficulty and offer the statement today instead. I do not know—we shall have to see—but I am on the side of the House in wanting Ministers to be accountable to it. That seems pretty clear to me.

Andy McDonald *rose*—

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I beg the hon. Lady's pardon. Point of order, Mr Andy McDonald, briefly.

Andy McDonald: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Has there been any discussion between you and the Secretary of State about whether the further reports and documents that are scheduled to be published today should have been delayed until the Secretary of State was before the House tomorrow, if at all possible?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is no. There have been no such discussions, and it would not automatically be expected that there should be. Let me simply say to the hon. Gentleman that I have not been advised of any revised plans. We will leave it there for now.

Gill Furniss: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 27 June, I put a parliamentary question to the Government asking when they would release the report on product safety produced by a working group from the Department

[*Gill Furniss*]

for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I am sure you will agree that, given the situation in which we find ourselves, particularly after the Grenfell Tower disaster, it is crucial for the House to be kept up to date with the progress of the report.

On 3 July, I received the response that an answer was being prepared and would be sent in due course. On 12 July, I asked another parliamentary question pursuing the matter, for named-day answer today. May I ask you, Mr Speaker, to kindly ensure that the Government make their response known as a matter of urgency?

Mr Speaker: It is highly undesirable for questions that have been tabled in good faith and an orderly manner some time before the recess not to receive an answer by the time of the recess. That is not some new development articulated at this moment by me from the Chair; it is a long-established and respected practice that Ministers try, to put it bluntly, to clear the backlog. It has customarily been expected that the Leader of the House would be a chaser after progress on such matters. I very much hope that the hon. Lady will receive a substantive reply to her written question or questions before the House rises for the summer recess. That would seem to me to be a matter of proper procedure, and indeed of courtesy from one colleague to another.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The working group to which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) refers was set up following a serious fire in my constituency last August. We were promised at least its first report before last Christmas, but we are still waiting. If we do not get it this week, and if we do not get a clear statement from the Government, we will be waiting, both in the case of my constituents and that of Grenfell Tower, until the autumn. The urgency cannot go unremarked by the Minister. Anything you can do to assist with that would be most welcome.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has transmitted his concerns through me to the Government, who will very quickly hear that he is on the war path on the matter, which might yield a positive outcome for him over the next 48 or 72 hours. It is up to him to judge whether, having heard or not heard anything from Ministers, he wishes to find ways of trying to secure attention to the issue on the Floor of the House before we rise for the summer recess.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would have given advance notice of this point of order, but I thought that we were having points of order a little later. Last week, after meeting trade union representatives from Rolls-Royce outside Bristol, I attempted to table a written question asking whether the Government are seeking to stay in the European Aviation Safety Agency post Brexit. My question was rejected, on the grounds that a similar question had been asked back in January and nothing had changed. The answer to that question had been that we cannot pre-empt the negotiations. Today I would like clarity on two points. First, how will we know that nothing has changed if we are not allowed to table questions about this? Secondly, I have been told that I cannot ask the question again until the end of the Brexit negotiations, which seems absolutely ludicrous.

Mr Speaker: Well, it strikes me as a very rum business indeed. I hope that it will be possible for the hon. Lady to receive some satisfaction. My strong advice to her is that she should make the very short journey from here to the Table Office and seek advice, because I am quite sure that it will be possible to achieve a satisfactory outcome. Forgive me for making this point again, but I do make it again: the hon. Lady effectively refers to being denied on grounds of repetition. Repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons. I think that we will leave it there for today.

Saudi Arabia: Anticipated Executions

3.53 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on what steps are being taken to intervene in the anticipated execution of 14 people in Saudi Arabia.

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his urgent question. Media reporting has suggested that 14 men could be facing the death penalty in Saudi Arabia for attending protests in the eastern province of the country in 2012. We are looking into the details of the reports and seeking urgent clarity from the Saudi authorities, both in Riyadh and here in London. I have been in contact with the ambassador for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who I know will come back to me with information when he has it.

We regularly make this Government's opposition to the death penalty clear—we are firmly opposed to it—and we raise such concerns at all levels and at all appropriate opportunities. The Saudis are aware of our stance on their human rights, and this position is a matter of public record. The Prime Minister most recently raised this during her visit in April this year.

Tom Brake: I thank the Minister for his helpful response. Evidence points to Saudi Arabia taking the final steps before executing up to 14 people, including at least two who were juveniles at the time of their alleged offences and were convicted on the strength of confessions obtained through the use of torture. Our Prime Minister has highlighted the UK's "long-term and historic relationship" with Saudi Arabia, and has said:

"rather than just standing on the sidelines and sniping, it's important to engage, to talk to people, to talk about our interests and to raise, yes, difficult issues when we feel it's necessary to do so."

I am sure the Prime Minister and the Minister will agree that 14 executions are just such a difficult issue and I am pleased that it has been raised urgently with the Saudi Government.

I would like to ask the following questions, however. Will the Minister ask the Prime Minister to call on Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to stop the executions—especially of juveniles Mujtaba Sweikat and Salman Qureish—going ahead? If the executions of juveniles and others arrested in relation to alleged protest activity go ahead, will the UK commit to freezing and reviewing any criminal justice assistance which could contribute to the arrest of protestors and dissidents in Saudi Arabia? What further steps will Her Majesty's Government take to condemn Saudi Arabia's use of the death penalty, especially in the case of people with disabilities and juveniles, such as Ali al-Nimr, Dawoud al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher?

Our Prime Minister is promoting the UK as a global nation. How she responds to the threat of summary executions by a partner and close ally will determine exactly what kind of global nation she intends the United Kingdom to be—a global champion of human rights or an apologist for human rights abusers.

Alistair Burt: First, on the death penalty, in particular in relation to juveniles, the UK Government oppose the death penalty in all circumstances and in every country, including Saudi Arabia, especially for crimes other than the most serious and for juveniles, in line with the minimum standards set out in the EU guidelines on the death penalty 2008, the provisions of the international covenant on civil and political rights and the Arab charter on human rights. A law has been proposed to King Salman by the Shura Council that codifies the age of majority at 18, and the death penalty should not be given to minors. All the cases the right hon. Gentleman mentioned towards the end of his remarks have been raised specifically by the United Kingdom, and in each case we have received assurances that minors would not be executed.

On the general relationship with Saudi Arabia, our starting point for engagement on human rights with all countries is based on what is practical, realistic and achievable, and we will always be ready to speak out as a matter of principle. Ministers frequently discuss human rights and raise concerns with the Saudi Arabia Government. We have a balanced relationship with Saudi Arabia and use engagement to encourage reform. This is a society that is going through a process of reform, heading towards Vision 2030, which the new Crown Prince has laid out as a pattern for Saudi Arabia for the future. Women's rights are changing with the addition of women to the Shura Council. It is a process that goes not at our pace, but at other paces.

We make sure that human rights are a key part of every conversation that senior colleagues have, and that would certainly be the case should it be necessary to intervene should any minors be in the position described by the right hon. Gentleman. As I indicated at the beginning, we have very sketchy reports on this at the moment. That is why we are doing more and I will write to the right hon. Gentleman when I receive further, more detailed information, so that he has it available.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

We have heard—over the years, indeed—Her Majesty's Government talk about the influence they have had over the actions of the Saudi Government in terms of capital offences. I would be very grateful if the Minister could from his place today give some examples of how that has paid off, because, on days like this, it does leave some questions to be answered.

Alistair Burt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his election to the office of Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. It is an important office, which was well held by his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), to whom we would all pay tribute. These are difficult jobs done by colleagues, and my hon. Friend did it particularly well, but we are very pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) in his place.

It is so difficult to try to prove a negative. The authorities with which we deal in Saudi Arabia are not necessarily in a position to make their judicial decisions

[*Alistair Burt*]

dependent on external pressure, and nor would we be in a similar situation. We know that allegations are made about possible executions, including those of minors, and that they then do not happen, but we do not know whether that can be laid at the door of any specific representation. I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that these representations are regularly made to a changing society and a changing judicial process in Saudi Arabia, which must, of necessity, be theirs and not ours.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I add my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question today. I also thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for bringing such an important matter to the House and for speaking so eloquently on the subject.

I am sure that all Members present today share my concern about the impending executions. Saudi Arabia is one of the world's most prolific executioners, and the death penalty is increasingly being used there as a punishment for non-violent acts. In January 2016, the Saudi authorities executed 47 men in a single day for alleged terrorism offences, and just last Monday, six men were killed. It is becoming clear that these executions are being used not only as a form of draconian punishment but as a tool to suppress political opposition, to fight sectarian religious battles against the Shi'a minority and to antagonise regional rivals in the process.

It is just over six years since the then Foreign Secretary, William Hague, declared that there would be “no downgrading of human rights under this Government”.

He went on to argue that

“pursuing a foreign policy with a conscience is...in the long term enlightened national interest of our country.”

It is striking how far the Conservatives have strayed from that commitment. When it comes to our relationship with Saudi Arabia, it would appear that human rights concerns are now of secondary importance to trade. This Government have treated Riyadh's human rights record as an inconvenient embarrassment rather than a cause for serious concern. Their reluctance to champion the values of human rights runs counter to who we are as a country and risks eroding our international standing, just when we need it most. My party's position on this matter is clear: the 14 executions—including those of two juveniles and one disabled man—must not take place. I call on the Government to use their influence to stand up for human rights and unreservedly condemn these planned executions.

Alistair Burt rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, I must say in all kindness to the hon. Lady that the fluency of her delivery was unfortunately not matched by any conformity with the expected procedure for the posing of an urgent question. I allowed her to continue, but for future reference—this is directed not only to the hon. Lady but more widely—an urgent question requires a brief sentence or two in response to the Minister, followed by a series of questions. It is not an occasion for the setting out of an alternative party position. It is not like a debate—[*Interruption.*] It might very well have been very good, as the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury

(Emily Thornberry) chuntered from a sedentary position in a rather inappropriate way, but unfortunately it was not very good at complying with our procedure. I say good-naturedly to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes)—and I am looking at the Opposition Chief Whip too—that we really must encourage compliance with the required procedure. Now, I would like the Minister very briefly to respond—30 seconds will suffice, I think—before we move on to further questioning.

Alistair Burt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks; I have got the gist of the points that she was making. Saudi Arabia remains a Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights priority country, particularly because of its use of the death penalty, its record on women's rights and its restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, religion and belief. No aspect of our commercial relationship with Saudi Arabia prevents us from speaking frankly and openly to it about human rights. We will not pursue trade to the exclusion of human rights; they can be, and they are, complementary. The United Kingdom will continue to adhere to that.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will agree that it is depressing how regularly the death penalty is carried out not just in Saudi Arabia, but in its neighbour Iran, which has already carried out dozens of executions this year. Given the small likelihood of persuading the Saudis to abolish the death penalty completely, does he agree that it is best to focus on getting them to adopt the most basic of standards, such as not executing people for crimes they committed when they were juveniles?

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. I concur with all my hon. Friend's points and, for brevity, I will leave it at that.

Mr Speaker: Splendid man.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for raising this issue today. The death penalty for political protest is something that horrifies any democrat. With that in mind, we have serious concerns about whether the Government are using their powers. The Minister confirmed that the Prime Minister has raised this matter, so was she satisfied with the response? If she was not, what further action will be taken?

Alistair Burt: The Prime Minister will continue to raise concerns as long as the United Kingdom has them. If we want to move to a position that would satisfy all of us, I suspect that Saudi Arabia is not yet there. Accordingly, the Prime Minister will continue to raise concerns if she believes that they are justified.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend again confirm that the Government oppose and abhor the death penalty in all circumstances and in every country, including Saudi Arabia? Does he share my concern that the death penalty is enshrined in Islamic sharia law—the law of Saudi Arabia? With what force is he is making our position known to our counterparts in Saudi Arabia?

Alistair Burt: I can only repeat what I have said before. The United Kingdom's opposition to the death penalty, our carrying that through by votes in this House and our adherence to international conventions makes that clear, but not everyone is the same. The United Kingdom cannot unilaterally change the law elsewhere, but we can and will stand up for the rights that we believe are correct, and from Iran to the United States to Saudi Arabia we will make that clear no matter which country is involved.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): We are constantly told by the Conservatives that we have values in common with Saudi Arabia. What are they? They do not involve human rights or international law, so what values can we possibly share with Saudi Arabia when they propose to crucify somebody and to use the death penalty against minors?

Alistair Burt: In response to the right hon. Lady asking about what we may share, we should not ignore Saudi Arabia's important contribution to regional stability. It has had its own painful experiences as the victim of numerous Daesh attacks, and collaborating with Saudi Arabia has foiled terrorist attacks, potentially saving British lives. There are areas where our interests work together in the interests of the United Kingdom, but that is of course not universal.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Given the fact that—alas, perhaps—we are no longer an imperial power able to send a gunboat to enforce our view of the world, will my right hon. Friend confirm that, in his considerable experience in the Foreign Office, a quiet conversation to make our case and set out our views is far more likely to be effective than shouting at people across the railings?

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Different approaches have different impacts. It would certainly not be right for people to be silent on things that they think are important; they should raise them publicly. It is also true, however, that quiet conversations with states over a period of time effect change, which is true in consular cases as well as in the higher profile death penalty cases. My hon. Friend is right that both approaches can have an impact, but sometimes they do not.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In the Minister's communications with the Saudi authorities about this particular group of people, will he establish whether reports are correct that others, again including juveniles, are facing similar charges?

Alistair Burt: I will make what inquiries I can. Certainly from the media reports we have, it will be important to find out whether any juveniles are involved. Non-governmental organisations in the west are normally quite good at finding out and reporting this information, and the United Kingdom has acted upon such information in the past. We will certainly look for that information, and I will gather as much as I can.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What impact does the Minister believe the 38% cut to the Foreign Office will have on dealing effectively with human rights in Saudi Arabia, or wherever?

Alistair Burt: All aspects of Government must pay attention to the need for financial probity, but the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has made sure that human rights is a key part of our work, certainly for as many years as I have been there—that now spans a few years—and human rights will remain a key part of desk work here and of the work that posts do abroad.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Among numerous others, my understanding is that the two juveniles at risk of execution were charged under Saudi Arabia's anti-cybercrime laws. Is the Minister in a position to confirm or deny that? Can he reassure the House that any cyber-security assistance and training provided by the UK to Saudi Arabia has not been used to facilitate charges that lead to the death penalty?

Alistair Burt: I do not have the detailed information that the hon. Gentleman asks for, but I will seek it. I will also seek reassurances in relation to the collaborative work on cyber-security, which is done to protect the United Kingdom and our common interests, rather than anything else. I will need further information before I can reply, but I will write to him.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that our relationship with Saudi Arabia enables us to raise our human rights concerns? This House should also appreciate that the Government of Saudi Arabia are taking steps to improve their actions on human rights, and particularly to improve the opportunities and rights of women in Saudi Arabian society.

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right. A vision of Saudi Arabia, as with a number of states in the area, is fixed in people's minds, but it does not always conform to the reality. Progress and reform in some of these states is extremely slow. They are very conservative societies, and sometimes their leaders are ahead of popular and religious opinion. It is a difficult process, but she is right. Objectively, it can be seen that the position of women has improved in relation to access to the Shura council and beyond, and there is more to come. The 100,000 people educated abroad by King Salman's predecessor included women who were educated in the west—in the United States and in Europe—and they were not intended to return to a Saudi Arabia that would be unchanging. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure the Whips mean well in advising on these matters, but they sometimes get the timing a bit wrong. When an hon. Member is receiving an answer to her inquiry, she should remain in her seat rather than beetling around the Chamber because some Whip suddenly wants to relay some piece of information. It is no doubt well intentioned, but misguided.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In response to the recent spate of executions, Amnesty International has renewed its call on the Saudi Arabian authorities to immediately establish a moratorium on all executions as a first step towards abolition of the death penalty. Can the Minister lend his support to Amnesty's calls?

Alistair Burt: As we are absolutely opposed to the death penalty in any circumstances, a moratorium is, in a sense, immaterial because we want to see the death penalty stopped everywhere.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I hear what the Minister is saying about talking to, asking questions of and advising the Saudi Government, but should not the UK Government stop pussyng around on this matter and demand that these executions do not go ahead? Those people were just protesting innocently and honestly for a fair society.

Alistair Burt: I understand the force with which the hon. Gentleman speaks. It is difficult always to convey to colleagues in the House exactly what the ambassador or the Prime Minister say in their conversations to convey, in a different form, exactly the same degree of force and concern that the hon. Gentleman conveys so eloquently.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): How far does the Minister really believe the UK's influence extends over Saudi Arabia? If the UK Government's supposed leverage cannot stop the Saudi Government beheading their citizens, why does he believe it is appropriate for the UK to continue to license the sale of arms to that country?

Alistair Burt: It is impossible to give a simple answer to the question of how much influence one state exerts on another. Let me point to a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia. It is a long-standing relationship on security and intelligence matters, which has acted in our interests and for the safety of our citizens. We have a common approach to dealing with not only terror and extremism, but changes in Saudi society over a period of time. As I say, it is not for those outside to take credit for internal changes. This is a continued dialogue with a state that we have known for a long time, but one that is still relatively new and coming to terms with the modern world. I think the relationship is the right one, but we will continue to press for the best values.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that executing individuals who were under 18 at the time of the commission of the alleged offence is in violation of not only international law, but Saudi domestic law? He is therefore on very strong ground in raising this matter. Will he do so in terms, because, whatever the longer term relationship, minors have been executed in the past year and many are now on death row there? Will he say exactly what representation he is making today or tomorrow? If he is in doubt about who is at risk, will he talk to Reprieve about that?

Alistair Burt: I reiterate the point that the UK makes about the death penalty, particularly in relation to minors. Where cases involving minors are brought to our attention, we reference them specifically, as we have done in several of the cases raised by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). I am gaining more information about the matters referred to in the newspaper report today, and if they do involve minors, specific representations will indeed be made.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order normally come after statements; I made an exception for particular matters

earlier. Is this just because the hon. Gentleman wants to beetle off to some other commitment or is this urgent for the House now?

Simon Hoare: Sir, I would not presume to adjudge its urgency; I shall leave that to the Chair. There appears to be some confusion, which I certainly would not want, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) is of a like mind. Last week, when we had the opportunity to question a Minister about matters relating to Saudi Arabia, I conferred with one of the Clerks at the Desk to find out whether my having been on a visit to Saudi Arabia was a declarable interest. The advice I was given by the Clerk was that it was entirely up to the individual Member but as I was raising a question—rather than instigating an early-day motion or debate, or giving a long speech—on our relations with Saudi Arabia, there was no registrable interest to declare. I understand that that might have changed today. I would not, as I know my hon. Friend would not, have wanted to have misled the House in any way, and I would value clarification on whether we need to declare an interest when merely asking a question of a Minister.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As far as I am aware, nothing has changed today. Although he may find this less than fully satisfactory, or even a tad disquieting, I am afraid I must give him the advice the Clerks tend to give: it is for each Member to judge whether something requires to be declared in the course of any parliamentary contribution. I put it to him that certainly a relevant factor for him to consider is whether such a visit was externally financed; I would have thought that that was a germane consideration. Members go on Select Committee trips on a very regular basis and, as far as I am aware, they do not always, in the course of every question, refer to the fact that they have been on a Select Committee visit somewhere. If there is a question of outside financing and an outside body, it might be thought to be prudent to refer to it. I think that was the matter the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent had in mind, and if she wants, briefly, now to make any declaration, I am happy for her to do so.

Helen Whately: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been brought to my attention that in asking a question a moment ago, I perhaps should have drawn the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Simon Hoare: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure there is a "further", but the hon. Gentleman has always seemed to be an amiable fellow, and therefore I shall indulge him.

Simon Hoare: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Ditto.

Mr Speaker: We are very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am sure the House feels better informed.

Schools Update

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): This Government believe that all children should have an education that unlocks their potential and allows them to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them. That is key to improving social mobility.

We have made significant progress. Nine out of 10 schools are now good or outstanding, the attainment gap is beginning to close and we have launched 12 opportunity areas to drive improvement in parts of the country that we know can do better. But that has all been against a backdrop of unfair funding. We know that the funding system is unfair, opaque and out of date, and that means that although we hold schools against the same accountability structure, wherever they are, we fund them at very different levels. In addition, resources are not reaching the schools that need them most.

School funding is at a record high because of the choices we have made to protect and increase school funding even as we faced difficult decisions elsewhere to restore our country's finances, but we recognise that at the election people were concerned about the overall level of funding for schools as well as its distribution. As the Prime Minister has said, we are determined to listen. That is why I am today confirming our plans to get on with introducing a national funding formula in 2018-19. I can announce that that will now be supported by significant extra investment into the core schools budget over the next two years.

The additional funding I am setting out today, together with the introduction of a national funding formula, will provide schools with the investment they need to offer a world-class education to every child. There will therefore be £1.3 billion for schools and high needs across 2018-19 and 2019-20 in addition to the schools budget set at spending review 2015. This funding is across the next two years as we transition to the national funding formula. Spending plans for the years beyond 2019-20 will be set out in a future spending review.

As a result of this investment, core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42.4 billion in 2018-19. In 2019-20 it will rise again to £43.5 billion. This represents £1.3 billion in additional investment, £416 million more than was set aside at the last spending review for the core school budget in 2018-19, and £884 million more in 2019-20. It will mean that the total schools budget will increase by £2.6 billion between this year and 2019-20, and per pupil funding will now be maintained in real terms for the remaining two years of the spending review period to 2019-20.

For this Government, social mobility and education are a priority. The introduction of the national funding formula—from which previous Governments shied—backed by the additional investment in schools we are confirming today will be the biggest improvement to the school funding system in well over a decade.

I said when I launched the consultation last December that I was keen to hear as many views as possible on this vital reform. I am grateful for the engagement on the issue of fairer funding and the national funding formula. We received more than 25,000 responses to our consultation, including from Members from across the House. We have listened carefully to the feedback we have received

and we will respond to the consultation in full in September, but I can today tell the House that the additional investment we can make in our schools will allow us to do several things, including increasing the basic amount that every pupil will attract in 2018-19 and 2019-20. For the next two years, this investment will provide for an up to 3% gain a year per pupil for underfunded schools, and a 0.5% a year per-pupil cash increase for every school. We will also continue to protect funding for pupils with additional needs, as we proposed in December. Given this additional investment, we are able to increase the percentage allocated to pupil-led factors; I know hon. Members were keen for that to happen. This formula settlement to 2019-20 will provide at least £4,800 per pupil for every secondary school, which I know Members in a number of areas will particularly welcome. The national funding formula will therefore deliver higher per-pupil funding in respect of every school, and in every local area.

These changes, building on the proposals that we set out in December, will provide a firm foundation as we make historic reforms to the funding system, balancing fairness and stability for schools. It remains our intention that a school's budget should be set on the basis of a single national formula, but a longer transition makes sense to provide stability for schools. In 2018-19 and 2019-20, the national funding formula will set indicative budgets for each school, and the total schools funding received by each local authority will be allocated according to our national fair funding formula, transparently, for the first time.

Local authorities will continue to set a local formula to distribute that funding, and to determine individual school budgets in 2018-19 and 2019-20, in consultation with schools in the area. I will shortly publish the operational guide to allow them to begin that process. To support local authorities' planning, I also confirm that in 2018-19, all local authorities will receive some increase to the amount that they plan to spend on schools and high needs in 2017-18. We will confirm gains for local authorities, based on the final formula, in September. The guide will set out some important areas that are fundamental to supporting a fairer distribution through the national funding formula. For example, we will ring-fence the vast majority of funding provided for primary and secondary schools, although local authorities, in agreement with their local schools forum, will be able to move limited amounts of funding to other areas, such as special schools, where this better matches local need.

As well as this additional investment through the national funding formula, I am confirming our commitment to doubling the physical education and sports premium for primary schools. All primary schools will receive an increase in their PE and sports premium funding in the next academic year.

The £1.3 billion additional investment in core schools funding that I am announcing today will be funded in full from efficiencies and savings that I have identified in my Department's budget, rather than higher taxes or more debt. That of course requires difficult decisions to be taken, but it is right to prioritise schools' core funding, even as we continue the vital task of repairing the public finances. I am maximising the proportion of my Department's budget that is allocated directly to frontline

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headteachers, who can then use their professional expertise to ensure that the money is spent where it will have the greatest possible impact.

I have challenged my civil servants to find efficiencies, just as schools are having to. I want to set out briefly the savings and efficiencies that I intend to secure. Efficiencies and savings across our main capital budget can, I believe, release £420 million. The majority of this will be from healthy pupils capital funding, from which we can make savings of £315 million. This reflects reductions in forecast revenue from the soft drinks industry levy. I will be able to channel the planned budget, which remains in place, to frontline schools, while meeting our commitment that every single pound of England's share of spending from the levy will continue to be invested in improving children's health; that includes £100 million in 2018-19 for healthy pupils capital.

We remain committed to an ambitious free schools programme that delivers choice, innovation and higher standards for parents. In delivering the programme, and the plans for a further 140 free schools announced at the last Budget, we will work more efficiently to release savings of £280 million up to 2019-20. This will include delivering 30 of the 140 schools through the local authority route, rather than the free schools route. Across the rest of the Department for Education resource budget, which is more than £60 billion a year, I will reprioritise £250 million in 2018-19 and £350 million in 2019-20 to fund the increase in core schools budget spending that I am announcing today. I plan to redirect £200 million from the Department's central programmes towards frontline funding for schools. Although these projects are useful, I strongly believe that this funding is most and more valuable in the hands of headteachers.

Finally, alongside the extra investment in our core schools budget, it is vital that school leaders strive to maximise the efficient use of their resources, to achieve the best outcomes for all their pupils and to best promote social mobility. We already provide schools with support to do this, but we will now go further to ensure that that support is used effectively by schools. We will continue our commitment to securing substantial efficiency gains over the coming years. Good value national deals that procure better value goods and services on areas that all schools spend money on and purchase goods in can save significant amounts. They are available under the deals based on our existing work such as on insurance or energy. Schools can save an average of 10% on their energy bills if they use a national deal. We will expect schools to be clear if they do not make use of these deals and consequently have higher costs.

Across school spending as a whole, we will improve the transparency and usability of data so that parents and governors can more easily see the way in which funding is being spent, and understand not just educational standards in schools, but financial effectiveness too. We have just launched a new online efficiency benchmarking service that will enable schools to analyse their own performance much more effectively. We recognise that many schools have worked hard up to this point to manage cost base pressures on their budgets, and we will take action this year to provide targeted support to those schools where financial health is at risk, deploying efficiency experts to give direct support to those schools.

The significant investment we are making in schools and the reforms we are introducing underpin our ambition for a world-class education system. Together, they will give schools a firm foundation that will enable them to continue to raise standards, promote social mobility, and give every child the best possible education and the best opportunities for the future.

4.32 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the slight advanced sight of her statement.

I will always be the first to welcome new money for schools. After all, I have spent a year asking the Secretary of State to give our schools the funding they need. It is nice to know I am finally getting through to her. I thank parents, school leaders and teachers across the country for all their work in pushing this issue up the political agenda. Both the Secretary of State and I know that this would not be happening today without them. But, sadly, today's statement raises more questions than it answers.

I welcome the £1.3 billion announced today, but will the Secretary of State confirm whether it will protect per pupil budgets in real terms, or just the overall budget? Astoundingly, this has all been funded without a penny of new money from the Treasury. Perhaps the Chancellor did not want to fund schools, and thought that teachers and teaching assistants were simply more overpaid public servants. I wonder whether the Secretary of State agrees with him. Does her decision to seek savings from the free schools programme mean that she finally agrees with Opposition Members who believe that the programme has always been inefficient? It has always been more expensive than Ministers hoped it would be, so the idea that hundreds of millions of pounds can now be saved seems like a bad joke. Will she simply be honest with the House and tell us all exactly how much money will be cut, from which spending items and who will lose out as a result?

I know that Conservative Members are in full retreat from their own manifesto, but I do not see how this £1.3 billion can possibly fit with it. We were promised £4 billion—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. A kind of group hysteria takes over. Mr Chalk, you are usually a very understated fellow—rather a gentlemanly type, I had always thought. Calm yourself. And you are sitting next to a very senior Member—Prince Andrew over there—who normally behaves as the very embodiment of dignity. Anyway, I am sure you will recover your composure in a minute. You should watch a few Federer matches; you will learn something about composure.

Angela Rayner: Conservative Members are in full retreat from their own manifesto. We were promised £4 billion only a few weeks ago, and now we are getting only £1.3 billion. Can schools expect anything else in future, or is this yet another broken promise?

The Conservative manifesto promised a free breakfast for every primary school pupil. First, the Secretary of State said it would cost £60 million, leaving parents across the country wondering how you can provide breakfast at under 7p per meal. Then she said that it would be £180 million, but that it would go only to the most disadvantaged pupils. She has had plenty of time

to get her figures straight, so can she tell the House whether this is still her policy? How many pupils will benefit, and how much it will cost?

The Secretary of State said that the full funding formula has been delayed again, with local authorities playing a role in setting budgets until 2020. Is this because she has finally acknowledged the role local authorities have to play? Or has she simply realised that to implement her plans fully she would need to pass primary legislation, and that her Government are so weak and wobbly that they cannot even get new money for schools passed through this House?

What the Secretary of State has announced today is nothing more than a sticking plaster. Per pupil funding will still fall over this Parliament unless further action is taken urgently. I will welcome the opportunity to protect budgets for our schools, but this statement alone will do nothing of the kind.

Justine Greening: There is only one party that is in full retreat from its manifesto, and it is certainly not the Conservative party. We heard over the weekend that the promise to students was not worth the paper it was written on. I think it was one of the most dishonest pieces of electioneering I have seen in many, many years. Our young people deserve better than to be peddled some snake oil propaganda that proves to be not true.

I am pleased that the hon. Lady recognises this extra investment. I am shocked to hear that the Labour party has now turned its head on fair funding and suggested it might have voted against introducing the fair funding approach of a hard formula. I think many schoolteachers will be deeply concerned by that change of stance—yet another one.

The hon. Lady talked about getting through to the Conservative party in relation to school funding, but we have been funding schools. I think the message that has not been getting through to the Labour party is that simply loading up more taxes on people and more debt on our country for the young people of the future is not a sustainable way to run the public finances. What the hon. Lady's response shows is that Labour has learned nothing in its time in opposition and has, in fact, gone backwards.

The hon. Lady asked some questions. I can confirm to her that we are, indeed, saying that we are going to have per pupil, real-term protection for the next two years. In relation to the free schools programme, what I was actually setting out—I do not think she properly understood it—was that we are protecting it, but we think we can finance it in a more cost-effective way. She then talked about the £4 billion, not realising, I think, that it was £4 billion over four years. I have set out £2.6 billion over two years. I think she will recognise that that is bringing the process forward at a faster pace, which is something to be welcomed.

One of the hon. Lady's few questions—she did not have a lot of questions to ask—related to the approach we are taking to local authorities. She may have realised—I am not sure from her question—that we were always going to have local authorities use an approach involving a local formula in 2018-19, as it was due to be a transition year anyway. We are simply saying that we want that to extend for a longer time period. Given the historic nature of this change, it is right that we take the

time to make sure that we work at local level to allow local authorities to adjust their funding to start matching the funding formula. However, schools locally will of course be able to see what amount they should be getting. I have no doubt that teachers, parents and governing bodies will raise questions for local authorities that deviate significantly away from the formula settlement that schools think they are entitled to have.

This a strong announcement of additional money combined with making sure that our schools budget is, for the first time in a generation, spread fairly across our schools and our children wherever they are growing up in this country. I hope that the House will broadly welcome it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Robert Halfon.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

This news will welcomed by schools, teachers and parents, especially given the additional costs facing schools. In addition to moving money from healthy pupil programmes, my right hon. Friend said that she is redirecting £200 million from the Department's central programmes to the frontline in schools. Which programmes are included?

Justine Greening: We will now go through a process of looking across programmes to identify the £200 million. Across an entire departmental budget of £60 billion, it is reasonable to make sure that my Department and its civil servants have to make efficiency savings in the same way—my right hon. Friend set this out—as we are expecting schools to do. I believe that we can and should do that. The alternative response—simply to dip into taxpayers' pockets every time we want to look at how we increase frontline school spending—is not only unsustainable but wrong when we can do a better job using the money we have got.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): While I welcome this announcement of extra money today, is not the fact that the Government got themselves into such a mess over schools funding an indication of the fact that they have not been straight with people all along—and I am not sure they are being entirely straight with people now? The Secretary of State talks about an increased schools budget but fails to mention that the number of pupils has increased significantly. Is it not the case that, even taking into account the money announced today, when considering per pupil funding the real-terms cuts that schools have faced since 2015 is £2.8 billion, with additional cuts of £8.9 billion, so there is still a massive shortfall? It is about time that the Government started being straight with the figures on the reality of what schools are facing on the frontline.

Justine Greening: I think we are setting out our figures very transparently. The numbers given on the website about school cuts have been worrying parents, but one thing I do not expect to happen as a result of today's funding announcement is for those numbers to be updated because it is far easier just to continue to peddle out-of-date data. The hon. Lady asked about the

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numbers of pupils. She is of course quite right, and that is why I am sure she will welcome the fact that I am saying that real-terms per-pupil funding will be maintained.

Mr Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): This is very good news for schools as they prepare to break up for the summer holidays. May I thank my right hon. Friend for engaging so constructively with colleagues across the House to make this progress? I particularly welcome her focus on bringing up the worst-funded schools, which has been so critically important for so long.

Justine Greening: This is a fundamental change to how we fund our schools and it is extremely challenging to get right. We held a very long consultation and took our time because we want to make sure that this work can take place on the ground. I appreciate that a formula needs to work for all colleagues, not just some, in very different communities up and down the country. That is why we have been listening to what people had to say, and we have reflected that today.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On Friday I visited Airedale Academy, which this year alone has already had £140,000 cut from its budget. That amounts to £190 per child. Was there anything in the Secretary of State's statement to indicate that it would get any of that money back? Despite being in a deprived coalfield area, our schools are being hit heavily by her funding formula. She has just said that schools will lose. They will get only a 0.5% cash increase per pupil, so will she confirm that that means that a lot of kids will still have a real funding cut? How many pupils will still face a real cut to their funding next year?

Justine Greening: I think that the right hon. Lady will welcome a number of things in the statement. Indeed, she has just pointed out that we will introduce a 0.5% increase per pupil for those schools that are currently above the formula, as opposed to those that need to catch up through additional funding. The position taken by both her party and mine was that there would be no cash losers, and we are going beyond that today. In other words, her school will receive more than it would have done had her party won the election.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Clearly, more money going to the frontline of schools is a very good thing. Obviously, the devil will be in the detail of the funding formula, which I know well having spent many hours poring over it myself. I want to pick the Secretary of State up on two things. First, on the increase to the percentage allocated to pupil-led factors, she will be aware that many people were unhappy with the overall percentage allocated to basic per-pupil funding. Secondly, many schools in Leicestershire and elsewhere have been historically underfunded for many years, but the allocation of £4,800 per pupil is not the same as the £6,000 per pupil that schools in other parts of the country will get. I fully appreciate that the Secretary of State has to operate within the constraints of responsible public funding, but schools in Leicestershire really need that historical underfunding to be corrected at some point.

Justine Greening: My right hon. Friend will no doubt welcome the fact that today's announcement means that there will be an increase in funding through core

pupil-led factors. I felt it was also right to protect the amount that was already going to children with additional needs, because we want them to catch up. On the overall amount, I assure my right hon. Friend that the formula takes into account the different cost bases in different parts of the country. Today's announcement means not only that schools will get more funding, but that they will catch up faster because of the 3% increase for two years, which replaces the previous proposal of 3% and then 2.5%.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is very unclear whether the Secretary of State has dealt with the underlying problems with the funding formula. Nine schools in some of the most deprived parts of Leicester West would have lost out because the Government's initial proposals drastically reduced the amount of money allocated according to deprivation.

Justine Greening indicated dissent.

Liz Kendall: The Secretary of State shakes her head, but that is what happened in my constituency. Has the underlying basis of the funding formula been changed, or are schools in the most deprived areas still going to get a bigger cut, harming not helping social mobility?

Justine Greening: We will set out the detail of the national funding formula in September, but it is not true that the deprivation amounts were cut. In fact, as I have said, I actively made sure that they were protected. The hon. Lady will no doubt welcome the fact that, as I said to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the schools in her community that were already well funded are being protected more than they would have been had her party won the election.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and applaud her for listening to the concerns that many of us have expressed about the funding formula for our local schools. At the end of the day, what really matters to schools is the budget that they are going to get. When will schools be told exactly what this will mean for their individual budgets? That is what headteachers, teachers, parents and governors want to know, so when will that information be disseminated? Can she confirm that the promise not to cut funding from any school applies to special schools as well as to mainstream schools?

Justine Greening: Briefly, the local authorities will now go through a process of setting a local formula, but we will confirm the allocation notionally to each school in September. That is a significant process, which involves confirming allocations for around 24,000 schools. Today, I have set out the funding not just for the core schools budget, but for high needs, and I hope that that is good news for my hon. Friend.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Schools in central Bedfordshire that currently get £4,314 per pupil will be very grateful to learn of the new figure of £4,800 per pupil. What can the Secretary of State do to spread best practice across academies regarding covering lessons when teachers are not ill? Some of my academies do this really well. They timetable a bit of extra time in so some staff can cover other staff. Could she have a word about spreading that best practice across all academies so that children do not miss out on lessons?

Justine Greening: I certainly will. One of our biggest challenges and opportunities is to enable best practice to spread more rapidly around our school system. That is one reason why I have introduced so-called research schools, which can be hubs in their local area for disseminating best practice and ensuring that it spreads quickly.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that protecting per-pupil funding from next year does nothing to reverse the cuts that are leading schools in Exeter to lay off teachers and staff now? What assessment has she made of the impact of raiding her own capital budget on vital improvements, for which many schools in my constituency will now have to wait longer?

Justine Greening: The funding I have set out is indeed for 2018-19, which is when the national funding formula will be introduced. In relation to capital, I simply believe that we can make better use of our budget. Significant funding has been set aside from the sugary drinks industry levy, and we have been able to retain that additional money despite the fact that receipts from the levy were slightly lower than we originally expected. I hope hon. Members welcome the fact that I am therefore pushing that to the frontline.

Mr Speaker: Mistakenly, because I was trying to do two things at once, I called two Government Back Benchers in succession. I would not want there to be a lingering sense of resentment on the Opposition Benches, so I call Mr Christopher Leslie.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to press the Secretary of State a little on the point that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon)—the new Chair of the Select Committee on Education—and some of my hon. Friends have mentioned: where in the Department is the money coming from? It sounds as though the Secretary of State will be robbing Peter to pay Paul from within central programmes. Will she set out a bit more clearly which of these central programmes will be cut: the teaching and leadership college, the standards agency, the mentoring programme, the longer school day programme, the 16-19 budget, university technical colleges or the apprenticeships programme? Or is she promising not to cut any of them?

Justine Greening: It is important to look across the piece to gain additional efficiencies from the Department. The hon. Gentleman talks about cuts, but the reality is that we have to take every single pound of taxpayers' money and get the most out of it. It has struck me how many different pots of money there are across the Department, and we have to make them work more strategically. In doing so, we can unlock funding that can go directly to the front line of schools.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcome the statement and give the Secretary of State 10 out of 10 for progress and a huge gold star for listening to the concerns of Members on the Government Benches and, no doubt, on the Opposition Benches. This morning, I was at the George Spencer Academy, an outstanding academy in my constituency—that is not my view, but the Ofsted rating. The reality is that it will not be replacing eight

teachers and a librarian because of the difficulties with its budget. I hope that today's announcement will go some way towards rectifying that.

The complaint of that academy is not the formula, but its rising costs. There are huge rises in pension and national insurance contributions, which nobody begrudges. Although it is a small part of the piece, I urge the Secretary of State to look at why local authorities are putting the apprenticeship levy on our schools. That cannot be right. It is not a lot of money, but it is very meaningful for school budgets.

Justine Greening: It is important to get on with making more apprenticeships available for young people, including in sectors like education, but I recognise what my right hon. Friend says. It is important that my Department does more to work proactively with schools to help them deal with some of the cost base pressures they have been facing. I feel that best practice can be spread more effectively through schools when they are working out ways to do smart timetabling and smart procurement deals. We need to do that much more systematically in the future and if we do, I believe that we can get much more out of the budget we already have.

Mr Speaker: Order. Pursuant to the plethora of points of order that I took on the subject of HS2 from right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House immediately after questions, I can inform the House that the Secretary of State for Transport would like to make a statement at the moment of interruption—that is to say, at 10 pm—this evening. I have acceded to that request on the basis that the official Opposition are content to hear the statement at that time, and I have received that assurance. There will be a statement, I believe entitled “HS2 Update”, at the moment of interruption tonight. I hope that that is helpful to the House.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In December last year, the National Audit Office said that the Secretary of State's Department was expecting 8% cuts, which is equivalent to £3 billion, in our school budgets—no one else but her Department. The figure was £24 million across Greenwich schools, which is the equivalent of 672 teachers. She went into the last general election saying that my schools were overfunded. Does she still believe that?

Justine Greening: I do not believe we did say that, but what I can say is that the hon. Gentleman's schools will now get a better settlement under the national funding formula than they would have got under his party.

Mr Speaker: I know that the House will want to be well informed. The moment of interruption would ordinarily be expected to be 10 pm on a Monday, but it is not certain to be at 10. It could be a bit earlier and it could be a bit later. The point that colleagues need to have lodged in their little grey cells is that the statement will come at the moment of interruption. Keep an eye on the annunciator—always a very good piece of advice to proffer to new Members.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Parents and pupils in my constituency will be delighted with the minimum funding of secondary school education, which

[*Antoinette Sandbach*]

will represent a substantial increase in secondary school funding. However, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State outlined the minimum level of funding for primary school pupils, which was not addressed in her statement.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is right. We will set out more of those details in September. Today, we are setting out the fact that we recognise that there is an issue of minimum funding levels in secondary education, and we would expect that to be reflected in primary education.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Figures from the Secretary of State's Department showed that 21 schools in my constituency were to lose out under her plans for the national funding formula before her announcement today. I am concerned that they still will, so will she guarantee today that those schools that were going to lose out on the basis of the formula no longer will, and that they will actually see gains?

Justine Greening: I think I have been very clear that every school will see gains from the announcement that I have made today, which I hope is good news. It is a reflection of the need to strike a balance between bringing up traditionally underfunded schools and recognising that those receiving higher funding need help to some extent to get on to the national funding formula.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I warmly welcome today's announcement from my right hon. Friend. This is a real moment of celebration for those of us who have been campaigning with the f40 Group for years for a proper fair funding formula. Will she confirm to my governors and headteachers in Gloucestershire that by 2020 all schools currently receiving £3,800 per pupil will be receiving £4,800?

Justine Greening: I have set out that we will have a minimum of around £4,800, which will be transitioned in over these two years. That is good news, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend who has been a tireless campaigner on fair funding. He has done an outstanding job of being very clear with me about his local community concerns and also his desire to see fair funding. It is responding to colleagues like him that has led to the statement today.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Secretary of State will know that the National Audit Office said just a few months ago that school budgets needed an extra £3 billion by 2020 to avoid cuts. How does she square that figure with the £1.3 billion that she has announced today over two years? She also knows that the high needs budget—spending on special educational needs—is rising faster than inflation and faster than per pupil numbers. What in this statement will deal with that?

Justine Greening: In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's first point, we are maintaining real-terms funding per pupil, as I have set out today. That sits alongside the other work that we are doing with schools to enable them to unlock efficiencies from the investment that is

already there. I have also set out further additional funding for high needs today, which I hope he will welcome, given his long-term interest in this area.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I hope that my right hon. Friend will accept that the West Sussex MPs who have been working with heads and parents will welcome the progress in her statement. May I say on behalf of the Back Benchers, perhaps the Parliamentary Private Secretary and the Minister for School Standards that we have all worked together and hope to continue doing so to get even more progress in future?

Justine Greening: It has indeed been a team effort to work out how we can best bring forward what is a very difficult thing: a national funding formula that broadly works for many, many different schools across our country, wherever they are, and one that is fair. We have more detail to set out in the autumn, but I hope I have given a clear signal to the House today that we are moving in the right direction and will indeed take this step forward to ensure fair funding.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State's partial U-turn is bound to be welcome, but given the extraordinary cost pressures that many schools across the borough of Rochdale already face, can she give me a guarantee that none will be forced to cut teachers or teaching assistants over this two-year period?

Justine Greening: There will be higher per-pupil funding in respect of every school in every local area. What we are saying is that we want to be able to give more money to headteachers to enable them to take the decisions that they think are in the best interests of their schools. I have spent many years as a school governor, and I know the work that goes on to make the most of the budgets. I also want to challenge my own Department to make some efficiencies so that we can put that money in the hands of headteachers to spend on the frontline in schools.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome the additional funding for Stockport schools, and I also welcome a very listening Secretary of State. Will she prove her mettle further by taking on board the recommendations on recruitment and retention contained in the report of the Education Committee in the last Parliament?

Justine Greening: This is a vital issue. I think we have more teachers in our school system now than ever before but we need more, and we have to ensure that the teaching profession—I have always seen it as a profession—is a strong career and one in which teachers see continued professional development right the way through and one that is competitive. One of my old teachers up in Rotherham is retiring today, and I have just written him a note to thank him for 45 years of service to children in Rotherham. Teaching is an amazing vocation and one that I would recommend to anyone who cares about developing our young people for the future.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As other Members have pointed out, the National Audit Office and the Secretary of State's own permanent secretary have highlighted the £3 billion of efficiency

savings that schools were required to make by 2020, including £1.7 billion of savings through what her Department described as “more efficient use of staff”.

The Secretary of State has now paraded the fact that she is giving £1.3 billion in additional investment. Can she tell us, hand on heart, that she is actually giving more money, or are those efficiency savings continuing as planned?

Justine Greening: This was clearly an announcement of more money. However, as the hon. Lady will recognise, it is important for us to work with schools not only on their non-staff budgets but on their staff budgets. When I talk to headteachers, they are keen to ensure that they are able to use the staff they have as well as they can. We will be working more proactively with schools to help them to understand how they can do that better.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I congratulate the Government on choosing to prioritise school funding, which has been such a huge issue in Tatton and throughout the country. All the Cheshire Members of Parliament have come to my right hon. Friend saying what we need for our local schools, and I therefore welcome today’s announcement. So that everyone can be clear about the position, however, will my right hon. Friend confirm that what she is saying is that there will be a higher per-pupil funding level for every pupil?

Justine Greening: Yes, indeed. We will be making that funding available to local authorities. Ultimately, local authorities will also go through a process of setting their local formulas, but the funding that we are giving them will enable them to do that.

It is fantastic to see my right hon. Friend back in the Chamber. She made a rapid start in representing her community on this issue after returning to the House. It is great to see her. She was, of course, subject to some of the nasty campaigning that I think will be debated in the Chamber later this evening.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): On Friday, Ravenstone Primary School in Balham sent a letter to parents announcing that it was making five essential support staff go. It has also lost a deputy head. If the school had not made those cuts, it would have faced a budget deficit of more than £150,000. Will the Secretary of State pledge that schools in Tooting will be given the necessary funding to maintain current staffing levels, and will she meet me, and the fantastic head of Ravenstone, to discuss the matter in person?

Justine Greening: I pay tribute to the hard work of many teachers, a number of whom I know, in our local borough of Wandsworth, but I think we should also recognise that were that school in a different part of the country at the moment, it would have a very different funding settlement, but would be expected to deliver the same results for local children. What I am saying today is that we want some fairness in our funding formula, and what I have announced will also mean that additional money will indeed go into schools.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement, and I thank her for all her work, but can she confirm that areas such as mine in Medway will benefit from the new funding

formula? We are being charged with building historic numbers of homes in the Medway towns. We are seeing new free schools coming on line, but will we get more? Under Labour, we saw schools shut in the Medway towns.

Justine Greening: It was not just grade inflation and poor standards that we inherited from Labour; it was a schools places crisis. That is why we had to get on with building hundreds of thousands of school places for children who needed them, and that is precisely what we have been doing. This funding formula does indeed mean that my hon. Friend’s local schools will be given higher per-pupil funding, and I assure her that we will not make the mistake made by the Labour party of not planning ahead for the school places that children need in their local communities. We will ensure that they do not end up without those places.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s statement did nothing to address the service and consistent underfunding of 16 to 18-year-olds. Over the last two years, there was an underspend of £267 million. Will the Government commit themselves to reallocating those moneys as soon as possible, and also to addressing the underfunding of 16 to 18-year-olds in the future?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. For too long, post-16 technical education has been put to one side; it now needs to be focused on. That is why the centrepiece of the Budget, from my perspective, was the “skills Budget” that we announced back in March. The CBI called it a “breakthrough Budget for skills”. We are now getting on with that reform, and not just by continuing to bring forward more apprenticeships, but by working with organisations such as the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses to look at how we can bring forward reforms on T-levels so that every child who chooses to go down the technical route, rather than pursuing a purely academic education, receives a gold-standard education.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for this great news. I have been telling my schools and constituents that she has listened, and today she has proved it. I want to ask for a couple of things. I appreciate that time is very tight and that we are due to hear more in September, but my schools are letting teachers go today. If there is any chance that we could have a heads-up on the figures before September, that would be very helpful. My area can offer expertise on efficiency, because our schools have proved to be more efficient than many across the country. Will she look again at the apprenticeship levy? It does not really work for schools.

Justine Greening: I take my hon. Friend’s point and assure her that we will be working very proactively with schools, particularly those that say they face the biggest challenges. I have put together a team of efficiency advisers who will be able to work directly with schools on the ground. I think that we can make a lot of progress in this area—we need to. I recognise her point about the cost base. It is about ensuring that our apprenticeships strategy really does give opportunities to young people in every single sector, while at the same time ensuring that we get funding to the frontline in schools, and that is what I have announced today.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I welcome more funding. Schools such as Derby High in my constituency cannot recruit teaching talent because they face the rising costs of national insurance, an ageing teaching population, the apprenticeship levy and increasing class sizes, and they need new school buildings. Will this new money be enough to address these complicated problems? Will it go far enough to provide the enrichment activities that have all but disappeared in schools, with a whole generation of children from 2010 missing out on such activities because of the imposition of austerity by her Government?

Justine Greening: I know that the hon. Gentleman shares my concern about improving educational standards in Derby, which has been a challenge for many—*[Interruption.]* I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for not recognising him—he is obviously the new Member for Bury North. I was going to talk about how important the opportunity area that we have set up in Derby is to me, but I can also assure him that standards in his schools are just as much a priority for me as standards in any other. Today we are trying to set out a way of ensuring that funding is fair for all schools, including the one he mentioned, but it will be complemented by additional funding, which I think he welcomes. That is part of our strategy for improving educational standards, but by no means is it all of it. It is not just about the amount of money we put into schools; it is about what we then do with it and the strategy behind it. As we have seen, education in Wales has been going backwards under Labour because it has no strategy, and as a result children are getting worse standards. We do have a strategy, which is why standards are going up.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: From one James to another—James from Bury to James from Braintree.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I welcome the Government's delivery on our manifesto commitment to ensure that no school loses out under the national funding formula—it is nice to see that at least one party takes its educational commitments at election time seriously. For clarity, can the Secretary of State confirm to the parents and teachers who were concerned about some of the scare stories that were kicking around in March this year that no school will lose out as a result of the changes in the funding formula?

Justine Greening: I believe that I can, in the sense that we are going beyond saying that no schools will lose out as a result of the formula, and are saying that every school will gain at least 0.5% additional as part of the introduction of the school formula. It is important for me to be clear that the way we are introducing it is through working with local authorities. They therefore will put their own formula—the final allocation—to schools, but we will be very clear that what we are giving them means that no school need lose out, and in fact, further than that, every school should be able to gain.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Warrington is one of the lowest funded authorities in the country, yet schools in my constituency were still losing out under the funding formula the Secretary of State had proposed, and were preparing to sack teachers and

teaching assistants. Can she confirm that she still does not regard these as underfunded schools, and that the 0.5% increase will not meet the costs imposed on them by staff pay rises, the apprenticeship levy and general inflation, and that pupils in those schools will still lose out?

Justine Greening: At this stage, the hon. Lady might be better off lobbying her those on her own Front Bench. What I have set out today will mean that her schools get a better settlement than they would had her own party won—disastrously, in my opinion—the last election.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to the consultation. Dorset has been historically underfunded for many years, so we are all extremely grateful for her announcement today. I have two questions. Can she guarantee to me that special needs will be met and properly funded? Also, I am afraid that I, too, do not agree with the apprenticeship levy; will she consider looking at that again?

Justine Greening: I have set out the fact that this additional funding will also in part flow into high needs, which is important. In relation to the apprenticeship levy, we are working with schools on a teaching apprenticeship, which will not only mean we can have more opportunity, but will enable those schools to be able to use that investment wisely.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State think it is right that schools in my constituency are already having to rely on donations from parents for books, stationery and other basic resources? This is not scaremongering; this is actually happening.

Justine Greening: I would respond in a couple of ways. First, we all recognise that the most important thing for parents is that standards are going up, and indeed they are, as we saw in the most recent key stage 2 results that came out last week. Also, I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that if there have been concerns about funding, this statement is a step in the right direction, because we are saying that we are going to put more into frontline schools. Additionally, I am saying we are going to fund more fairly, something that is long overdue.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): May I mark my right hon. Friend's homework today with a resounding tick and “VG”, and may we write in the margin a note to the effect that under her stewardship this Government are spending more on schools than the Labour party ever did? May I ask for her reassurance on a point that I have lobbied her and her Ministers on for some time? Devon has historically been underfunded, so can she assure me that today's very welcome package means that that historical underfunding, which has existed under Governments of all colours, will be corrected? If she can do that today, I will upgrade her to a gold star.

Justine Greening: Well, I think I might be getting upgraded because I can tell my hon. Friend that this will mean additional funding for schools in Devon. I know the debate that has happened in that part of our country. If we are going to have a country that works

for everyone, it is vital that regions like the south-west are able to develop their talent in the same way as any other part of our country, and Devon will indeed benefit from my announcement today.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I remain concerned about the position of the 28 schools in Liverpool, Riverside that were due to lose funding under the Government's formula. Can the Secretary of State assure me that they will not lose any funding from any source, and would she not agree that the £200 million cut to central projects that she announced today is really cutting by the back door?

Justine Greening: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. I can confirm that we are making the additional funding available, including to schools in her community. If any of them get less, that will be the result of a decision by her local authority, which I am sure she will want to follow up. More broadly, we need to recognise that, over time, several different pools of money are rightly directed towards improving schools across our country, and I want to see those working more efficiently. We also need to ensure that parts of my Department are being run efficiently, and the prize for doing that better will be to have more money to channel to frontline schools. That is precisely what I plan to do.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Under the outgoing system, introduced by the previous Labour Administration, schools in West Sussex were among the lowest funded in the country, so I very much welcome the new national funding formula, which will result in a significant enhancement for schools in Crawley. May I seek an assurance, however, that capital funding for projects such as the necessary rebuilding work at Holy Trinity School in my constituency will not be affected as a result of this new revenue coming forward?

Justine Greening: I can assure my hon. Friend that there will be a substantial capital budget, not only to deliver the additional school places that we need but to invest in improving our school estate. As I have set out today, some of the additional money that we had expected from the sugar drinks industry levy can indeed be retained and converted into revenue to go to schools on the frontline. On capital, this Government have invested in the school estate and will continue to do so.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I offer to help the Secretary of State to find efficiencies in the budget? No school on its own can take on the unfair and exponentially rising private finance initiative costs, but the Department could lead a challenge to this. Will she help schools in my constituency to do that?

Justine Greening: As part of the consultation on the draft formula, we had to accept that some schools were saddled with PFI commitments put in place by the Labour party. Rather than penalising the schools, we propose to honour those commitments. However, the hon. Lady has raised a genuine point, which is that we need to work with schools with those liabilities and to understand how we can now manage them effectively. We also need to learn from those mistakes, so that we do not saddle schools with more debts and commitments that they cannot afford, like those that were introduced under Labour's failed PFI schemes.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Schools in Corby and east Northamptonshire have been underfunded for far too long, relative to other areas, and I am pleased that my right hon. Friend is putting that right. Will she continue to keep at the forefront of her mind the challenges that rural schools face in relation to their viability, as well as the big challenges that housing growth presents?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend will know that the original consulted formula looked at how schools in more sparsely populated areas could cope effectively and at how we would cope with housing growth when it takes place. I have said that I will respond more fully to the consultation in September, and that response will cover all those points, but he is right to put the issues on the table. We will think carefully about them.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Many of the primary schools in my constituency are planning to cut staff and, under the new schools funding formula, all but one of our secondary schools will have big cuts in their budgets. If this new formula and the new settlement are so good, will that no longer have to happen?

Justine Greening: The amount of money that the hon. Gentleman's local authority will get in the coming two years will not see any cuts. In fact, as I have said, a 0.5% increase per pupil will be allocated to that community. I reiterate that this is indeed a better settlement for those schools than would have been the case had his party won the election.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I accept that I have been a pain in the butt to both parties over the years. I remember saying to Prime Minister Tony Blair many years ago that the funding postcode lottery between counties was unfair and he agreed, but he did nothing about it. I was also a pain in the butt to the Schools Minister when I gave him a hard time a couple of months ago. I welcome today's announcement, but the Secretary of State will know how much the National Union of Teachers' website has alarmed students and parents over the past few months. When our school funding formula is announced, will it be transparent and available on a website, school by school?

Justine Greening: Indeed it will be, and I hope that the unions will choose to update their websites with accurate data. As the questions today have demonstrated, it is not easy to introduce fairer funding. There are millions of reasons why it is a difficult step for any Government to take, but we have done it because we cannot expect social mobility or strong education outcomes everywhere when our children are funded in such different ways, purely depending on where they happen to grow up. Nobody can accept that if we want to tackle inequality of opportunity, and that is why we are taking these steps. It is complex, but we are doing it because it is the right thing to do.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I welcome any additional funding. There is a lot of concern about the safety of schools following the Grenfell Tower disaster, so will the Secretary of State update me on how many schools in my constituency will be inspected, how that work will be co-ordinated and how any remedial action will be funded?

Justine Greening: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be reassured to know that we have already done a survey across all our schools to identify any that have or think they might have that particular sort of cladding. We have had a good response from schools, and we have been in contact with the handful of Members who have a school in their constituency with cladding that has needed testing. I reassure the House that we were clear to schools with such cladding that fire inspections should be done ahead of any testing of the cladding. We have been through that process now and, for the two schools with positive test results, the fire inspections had already shown that they were safe to continue operating. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to identify the importance of the matter, and I assure the House that working with schools on this has been uppermost in our minds over recent weeks.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the extra funding for schools in my constituency, especially the extra investment in the core schools budget and the higher per-pupil funding. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the new formula will address the unfairness that has seen some schools in Wealden and across East Sussex remain underfunded for many years?

Justine Greening: Yes, it will. My hon. Friend speaks up tirelessly for her local community on this, and today's announcement will mean more money for that community. I have no doubt that her local authority will now want to ensure that it spreads that money fairly and will set out the notional allocations for schools in the autumn.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I make a suggestion to the Secretary of State? With the £1 billion earmarked in the Budget for capital funding to extend the free schools programme and the millions that her Department has already written off due to the chaotic funding formula for free schools, would it not be better just to scrap the free schools policy and actually put money into schools, such as those in deprived areas of Hull, that are seeing cuts to teachers and services?

Justine Greening: We need to get a balance between investing in the existing school estate, as the hon. Lady sets out, and planning ahead to ensure that we have school places and schools for children who are coming into our school system, particularly the secondary school system. All that we are saying with free schools is that the long-standing monopoly that councils had on being the only organisations that could introduce a new school into an area should change, and we changed it so that communities can set up their own schools if they want. That is what many have done and that is why we have seen so many free schools established. We will continue with that pipeline so that more of that can happen in the future.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Like many, I welcome the commitment to the national funding formula. I am also confident that schools in Carlisle will welcome the increase in spending over the next few years. Can the Secretary of State also confirm that the very successful pupil premium funding will continue as is, and that there are no plans for it to form part of the national funding formula?

Justine Greening: I confirm that the pupil premium will be maintained. The pupil premium is important, and it has been a significant driver of how we have managed to begin steadily reducing the attainment gap between children in our country.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Before the election, the Secretary of State would only commit to two years' implementation of the funding formula and would give no commitment to implementing the rest of the formula post-2020. Today's statement refers to a longer transition period. How long will it take to implement the full spending formula changes?

Justine Greening: I will set out our response to the consultation more fully in the autumn. As the hon. Lady says, we will need to come forward with more details. Today I am being clear about the overall level of funding going into schools while also, I hope, giving colleagues reassurance on specific elements before we set out our full plans in September.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. One headteacher has already emailed me to indicate that it will be worth about £300 per pupil. As the Secretary of State will know, Torbay schools have been underfunded for many years due to the inequities in the current funding formula. Can she confirm that the per-school funding amounts will quickly be available so that those schools will not have to rely on a dodgy website?

Justine Greening: Once we have done our analysis over the summer, we will make the per-school spreadsheets available. I hope that people will look at them, because they will contain the actual reality of school funding, rather than some of the falsehoods that are being peddled.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that, with schools having to pay £575 million in employer contributions to the teachers' pension scheme and £625 million in national insurance contributions, and with inflation at 2.9%, the £1.3 billion that has been announced will barely cover those costs?

Justine Greening: I do not agree. What is important is that we are able to maintain the rates of per-pupil funding in our schools. That is what I have set out today, and we can only do it because we have a strong economy that is creating jobs, growth and taxes that fund our vital public services. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that, every time we want to increase our public spending, we have to reach into the public's pocket and raise taxes. That is simply not sustainable. Neither is it sustainable to have increasing debt when our debt interest is still more than the amounts we are investing every year in our schools and high-needs funding. It is vital that we have a long-term strategy to deal with that debt, and I believe that we can make our departmental budget work more effectively and, in doing so, get more money to the frontline of schools. That has to be the first port of call for anyone in my role, rather than resorting to higher taxes or more debt.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As a parent and a Member of Parliament for a rural constituency, I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. May I urge her,

as the new formula is finessed, to keep at the forefront of her mind the higher cost of staffing and running a school in a rural area, compared with schools in an urban setting? I hope that will be reflected in any formula.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend has done a good job of raising that issue and setting out his local area's concerns. This was part of the consultation we launched earlier this year, to which we have had 25,000 responses. We have gone through most of them, but we will set out our full response in September. Suffice it to say that I recognise those issues, and I am looking to get it right.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I appreciate that the Secretary of State does not yet have the details of what she is proposing, but parents and headteachers in my constituency will have listened to her announcement and will be wondering, as I am, what it will mean for our schools. We were expecting cuts of up to £700 per pupil in some of the most deprived schools in my constituency under the fair funding proposals. Can I now go back and reassure my constituents that the funding cuts to all the schools in my constituency will now not go ahead?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady can be clear about the fact—I hope she will welcome it—that today's statement means there will be higher per pupil funding for every school in her constituency and every local area. I very much hope her local authority passes on those gains directly to schools.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement on the fair funding formula, and I declare an interest, as a proud father of three children who will benefit as a result of it. Will she confirm that every parent with children at schools in Dorset and Poole, which have been historically underfunded, will benefit and that no school in my constituency will lose out as a result of her announcement?

Justine Greening: I can confirm that we will give local authorities the funding to make sure that what my hon. Friend has said is indeed the case. That is why this is an important step forward; it will balance the need for more investment in our schools system—which is precisely what we are doing—with making sure it is fairly funded. He represents a community that will benefit from an improved fairness in our funding system.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Trafford has traditionally been an underfunded authority, so I welcome any attempts to introduce a fairer funding formula, but I have particular concerns about whether funding will continue to reach schools that have a high proportion of high-needs students. We are already seeing de facto rationing, as parents are experiencing long delays for statements—or they are not getting them at all. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that in developing this funding formula the exceptional needs of those high-needs children will always be protected and they will not pay the price for an attempt to even up the playing field across the piece?

Justine Greening: This statement will mean more money going into the high-needs budget, which I hope the hon. Lady will welcome. It is also worth reflecting

on the fact that more generally within the formula I have been careful to ensure that money will follow children who are going into primary and secondary already behind, in order to help them to catch up. We looked at this in several different ways to make sure that no child was not getting the appropriate amount of investment. My concern in doing all of this was the fact that a child growing up in her community would get a very different amount invested in them than they would if they had grown up in a very different part of the country. That is iniquitous and we need to change it. I am delighted to be able to say that we are introducing fair funding, so we will change that for the better.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on today's statement. Schools in my constituency will be delighted to hear that per-pupil funding is being protected in real terms, and taxpayers in my constituency will be delighted to hear that it is being done through departmental efficiencies. Does she agree that paying for this by putting additional borrowing on to future generations really would be robbing Peter to pay Paul?

Justine Greening: I totally agree with my hon. Friend; none of these steps are easy. It would be far easier simply to put up tax, which is what the Labour party wants to do. That is not the right thing to do—never more so than now, given some of the challenges our country faces. We need to make sure we use the money that we are already getting efficiently, which is precisely what I have set out today. As I have said, the prize for doing that is to be able to put more money to the frontline of schools.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): When the Minister for School Standards met a cross-party delegation of Cumbrian MPs as recently as March, he was clear with us that it was necessary and fair for the schools budget overall, after having been protected, to now play its part in the Government's strategy of deficit reduction. Was he right or was he wrong?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman is trying to get some politics out of what is basically a sensible announcement that I have made on more funding for schools. I am interested in what we are doing practically to improve education, rather than in the politics around it.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and her Ministers for taking so much time to listen to my concerns about Cheltenham's schools and the concerns of 40 schools up and down the country affected by historic unfairness. This is a huge step forward. Will she confirm that every secondary school in Cheltenham will receive at least £4,800 per pupil regardless of additional needs funding for which individual pupils might be eligible?

Justine Greening: I have set out today that we will put in a floor of £4,800. I think that that is important. I should put on the record my tribute to my hon. Friend and the campaign setting out his local community's concerns in Cheltenham. He has done a very good job of being clear about local needs, and that has helped form today's statement.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Many young people in Bristol choose to go to St Brendan's Sixth Form College in my constituency rather than stay on at their school sixth forms. Will the Secretary of State categorically assure us that those pupils will benefit from fairer funding? At the moment their choices are being restricted, as are their facilities, because of cuts to sixth form colleges.

Justine Greening: Today's statement is, of course, about the core schools budget and high needs funding. There will be higher per pupil funding for every school and every local area. That will enable schools to do a better job in their local provision. The hon. Lady sets out some of the challenges of sixth form funding, but I want to reassure her and the House that we are absolutely committed to ensuring that children stay in a well-funded school system. I know that Bristol has successfully focused on education in recent years, and it is important that we work together to see that success continue.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): This statement will be welcomed by parents across Nottinghamshire and I know that the Labour party will be outside the school gates in my constituency once again, helping us to disseminate the good news. May I press the Secretary of State on free schools? I am glad that she is still committed to them, and we in Newark have seen the absolutely transformational effects of a good free school on a community. Will she confirm today that all the free schools due to open either this September or next September, including the brilliant one in Newark, the Southers School, will open?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. There is a strong pipeline of free schools and we are getting on with things in that regard. Indeed, more than that, what I have said today is that we are underwriting the next 140, and I am simply setting out that I think we can deliver that more cost-effectively. The reward is to release additional funds for the frontline of schools, including in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I welcome the additional investment that has been announced today, but the Secretary of State will know that statements made by Ministers during the last Parliament on core funding and the national funding formula will already have been factored into schools' three-year business plans. As a result, schools in Greenwich and Woolwich and other constituencies will already have started to restructure and, in many cases, to lay off teaching and support staff. Will the Secretary of State confirm that there is nothing in today's statement that undoes the damage already done by the Government's direction of travel?

Justine Greening: The direction of travel, including in schools in London, has been towards higher standards. The real challenge is improving school standards across the country, so I hope that we will continue to travel in that direction. Having been a governor, I am sure that the additional funding I have set out today will be spent by schools, as and when they receive it.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I push the Secretary of State for a little more guidance on how local authorities will allocate the money? In particular,

will she allow hon. Members on both sides of the House who have become more involved with spreadsheets and schools than they would care to be to be involved in the process so that we can identify which schools have an unfair deal within the LEA?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises an important point. What will now happen is what happens every year: local authorities will consult on a formula to spread the money they will receive around the school system. We have made sure that, for the first time, as of 2018-19, that amount will be fair, unlike in the past, and I encourage Members from all parties to work with local authorities as part of that consultation process to ensure that they feel that the money is being fairly spread. I will be clear that there is an indicative budget for every single school from 2018-19 onwards and I am sure that local authorities that do not want to pass that amount of money to schools will be asked why that is so.

Mr Speaker: I call Mims Davies.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Thank you, Sir; lucky me. In my constituency surgery on Friday parents once again raised the issue of high needs with me, so I thank the Secretary of State for this statement, especially for its focus on that area. As she is being so bold, will she look at nursery funding, and post-16 funding, which we have heard about today, where standards can really make a difference to our children's generation?

Justine Greening: I reassure my hon. Friend that we have done so. Indeed, she knows that there has never been more additional investment in early years than under this Government. The good news is that the quality of early-years provision is getting better; that is to be welcomed, and it can, over time, significantly shift the dial on social mobility.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement from the Secretary of State, which will benefit all schools in Harborough, Oadby and Wigston. I further welcome the fact that the funding is coming from efficiencies within the Department, rather than unfunded borrowing. There has been an excellent announcement that she will invest an extra £500 million a year in technical education. Will she confirm that today's measure is not being funded by any raid on that, because it is an important reform?

Justine Greening: I take this opportunity to welcome my hon. Friend to the House. We are committed to pushing on with that Budget announcement. I am absolutely determined to make sure that that this really will be "a breakthrough Budget for skills", as the CBI described it. We have had excellent engagement with employers on technical education since we set out our broader strategy. I assure my hon. Friend that the investment will be flowing in.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, Rachel Maclean.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I join hon. Members in welcoming this announcement from my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State Schools in Redditch such as the Ipsley RSA Academy, whose pupils I have just been hosting in Parliament, will also welcome it. In Redditch, we have a three-tier education system. Can she confirm that the three-tier system will benefit from her announcement, just as the two-tier system will?

Justine Greening: I can confirm that the announcement will mean higher per-pupil funding for every school in my hon. Friend's community. That is good news for Redditch, and I hope that it will see continued improvements in standards.

Point of Order

5.47 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker. On Friday, I was meant to meet the hard-working staff of Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service in Bennett House in my constituency. Bennett House is leased by the Ministry of Justice and is scheduled for closure, and I was meeting staff who have concerns about those plans in my capacity as the local Member of Parliament. The meeting had to be moved, as MOJ officials informed staff that I would not be allowed on site, and that if I tried to get on site I would be prevented from doing so. I seek your guidance on how best I can raise this matter with the Ministry of Justice, and seek to ensure that other Members of Parliament are uninhibited by the Ministry in going about their constituency duties.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman—a new, or new-ish, Member of the House—is alleging a breach of privilege, that is properly raised with me in writing. I would then in turn address the matter in writing. However, as he has not specifically used that term or made that allegation, but complained of what might be called—in his mind, certainly—an unreasonable prevention, or some sort of let or hindrance, this is not strictly a point of order for me as Chair of the House. That said, I am rather concerned to hear that a Government Department has prevented his access to a Government building in his constituency. The hon. Gentleman has made his concern clear, and it is on the record. This is ultimately a matter for Ministers to determine, but let me say without fear of contradiction and very explicitly that this is pretty obviously an unhelpful attitude on the part of a Government Department, and I would hope that a Minister would direct the Department not to obstruct a Member going about constituency business in that way.

BILL PRESENTED

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS - CREWE) BILL
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Grayling, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary David Mundell and Secretary Alun Cairns, presented a Bill to make provision for a railway between a junction with Phase One of High Speed 2, near Fradley Wood in Staffordshire, and a junction with the West Coast Main Line near Crewe in Cheshire; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 6) with explanatory notes (Bill 6-EN).

Scheduling of Parliamentary Business

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

5.50 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the scheduling of parliamentary business by the Leader of the House and the implications of a two-year session for Standing Orders requirements.

Mr Speaker, I thank you for agreeing that this debate should take place. This is not a debate about a debate. It is about an important point of principle: our parliamentary democracy and the role of this House. It is about the Opposition and other Members holding the Government to account, and it is about the sovereignty of Parliament. This House is not supine. Our constituents—the electorate—expect us to be here. They voted for us, in the official Opposition's case, to set up our programme for change. This minority Government are not working.

The Standing Orders are set out in the Blue Book. Rules and procedures have to be consistent, certain and clear. What does the book say about Opposition days? Standing Order 14 says:

“Twenty days shall be allotted in each session for proceedings on opposition business, seventeen of which shall be at the disposal of the Leader of the Opposition and three of which shall be at the disposal of the leader of the second largest opposition party”.

[*Interruption.*] Will Government Members hang on a second? Given the Government's announcement of a two-year Session, references to Sessions in Standing Orders should be interpreted as per year, with dates allocated pro rata.

The Government announced by press release:

“Rare two-year Parliamentary session...Double the length of a normal Parliamentary session”.

Therefore, the implication of those plain words is that the number of days would be doubled.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The hon. Lady does not realise how lucky she is. When we were in opposition, we did not have the benefit of this Speaker in the Chair to call urgent questions with the frequency that he does now to the huge advantage of the House. We would have traded any number of Opposition days for the wisdom of the current Speaker—long may he remain in the Chair. By the time hon. Members actually get to an Opposition day debate, the Gallery is empty and the journalists have all pushed off having written their copy.

Mr Speaker: I am overcome with excitement. I am going to get very emotional in a moment. We are grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Valerie Vaz: That intervention deserves no response whatever; I am really sorry.

Wait for this: in the 2010-12 Session, extra days were provided for business. Once the 20 Opposition days provided for in the Standing Orders had been allocated, a further 14 unallotted days were provided. We need certainty. The Government have not provided for an Opposition day before the summer recess, making the earliest Opposition day in September 2017. This means a staggering eight months—nearly as long as it takes to have a baby—without a single Opposition day, denying vital scrutiny of Government business. As you know,

Mr Speaker, the last Opposition day was on 25 January. At the same point into the parliamentary Session in 2010-12, the Opposition were granted three Opposition days, and five in the 2015 Session.

We need to be clear. At business questions last week, the Leader of the House said in response to a question—not to me, although I did ask—that a date was offered in September. I was not aware of this Opposition day, whether through the usual channels or the usual suspects, so we need to clarify what a Session is. It is now two years, but we would not expect one year's worth of Opposition days to be allocated over those two years. Why is this important? Today is the 18th day that the new Parliament has been sitting. So far, legislation has been discussed only on four of those days for a total of just under 13 hours.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Lady says that a Session should last one year. Why, then, were there only 20 days in the 1997-98 Session, which lasted 18 months? In 2001, there were only 20 days. In the 2005 Session, which lasted 18 months, there were also only 20 days.

Valerie Vaz: The hon. Gentleman clearly was not listening. The Standing Orders state exactly what a Session is, and the Government have extended it.

Why is this important? Decisions have to be made on important matters that affect our country. So far, the Government have been pushed to give us an answer. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) had to table an amendment to the Queen's Speech. Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) had to secure an emergency debate on contaminated blood to set up an inquiry, to which the Government conceded only just before the start of the debate.

As is the usual convention, I have asked the Leader of the House several times for a debate on the Social Security (Personal Independence Payment) (Amendment) Regulations 2017, the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 No. 1205 and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 No. 1026, which have been prayed against. Time was given on 19 April but, given the interruption of the election, no time has been offered for that debate. The failure of this Government to allow a debate and a vote on the regulations has created growing uncertainty for students starting university or continuing their studies in the coming academic year. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the regulations have not been enacted and that there will be no increase for students in September? Paragraph 5 of schedule 2 to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 states that for any increases in the higher amount of tuition fees, it would be necessary that “each House of Parliament has passed a resolution”.

That has not been enacted yet, so have the Government sneaked this in under another Act and betrayed our young people?

This Government are just not working. There has been no justice for the 1950s women—an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) last week. My hon. Friends the Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), and the hon. Member

for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), have all raised this important issue, as have many Conservative Members.

We need a debate and a votable motion on the health service. There has been a 23% fall in nursing applications. As the shadow Health Secretary said today, more than 12,000 surgical procedures on children and young people were cancelled last year—an increase of 35%. GPs are now charging for visits; that is obviously an end to the national health service as we know it.

A decision has to be made on the Swansea tidal lagoon before the end of July. I have a letter here that has been signed by 107 Members from all parties, asking that the Hendry review is put into effect. I also raised that matter at business questions.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill has now been published, and a number of statutory instruments will flow from it. Clauses 7 to 9 of the Bill all state:

“A Minister of the Crown may by regulations make such provision as the Minister considers appropriate”.

It is about Ministers having the power to do what they want. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union deflects this point. He said that if a statutory instrument is before the House, the House of Commons decided whether it debates it and votes on it. He said that that is in the call of the House of Commons and, patronisingly,

“it is what they call a statutory instrument which is, can be debated, can be voted on.”

Sorry, I cannot get his voice right.

The Secretary of State thinks that we should be debating. When was the last time the Leader of the House actually spoke to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union? The minority Government are not working.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Valerie Vaz: No. The hon. Lady will get the same answer that Mr Speaker would give—it is up to me to decide whether I give way. I just want to proceed.

Then there is the question of the days allocated for private Members' Bills: 13 have been allocated up until November 2018—that is 18 months, although the current Session lasts for two years. Why have no Opposition days been allocated? Are the Government scared of the Opposition? No dates have been agreed for Backbench Business debates, despite the diligence of the Opposition in having a Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

I repeat the Prime Minister's words: “debate and discussion” are

“the hallmarks of our parliamentary democracy”, although it seems that her Cabinet are busy trying to push her out. The Government need to know that, for our democracy to thrive, the citizens of this country need to have faith that their MPs will represent their views and not be disfranchised. It is vital for democracy to have debates when required by convention, and for the Opposition to set out what they stand for. The electorate need to see us at work—to see the rhetoric turned into action.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Valerie Vaz: No, I am going to proceed.

If the Government truly believe in the rule of law, where Parliament, the Executive and the judiciary all play their part in upholding our democracy, the Leader of the House has to honour the interpretation of Standing Orders, clarify them, grant debates and uphold conventions in this Session. The key question is, is this in the public interest? The answer is a resounding yes.

6.1 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. I know that you, Mr Speaker, have granted it with your usual focus on ensuring that Back-Bench voices can always be heard and on handling the creative tension between Back Benchers and the Government's right to schedule their own business. I am sure the temptation to be a bit teary after the example of centre court yesterday will never overtake you, but we are all grateful to you for granting this debate.

The debate gives me the chance to say that the business brought to this House since the general election is quite simply business as usual. As the House would expect, I will expand on that. As always happens after a general election, the House is getting itself in order so that the business can run smoothly.

Many important debates have already taken place. Last week, we had a vital debate on the Grenfell inquiry. Many powerful points were raised by Members on both sides of the House. It is right that we prioritised giving time to such a catastrophic and tragic event. This week, we are having a general debate on what more can be done to eradicate the evil of drug misuse. Today we are scheduled to have a debate on the intimidation and abuse of candidates in the general election—abuse that challenges the very heart of our democratic process—but it is now under threat because of this debate.

Those, to me, seem perfect examples of our parliamentary democracy working well, with lots of opportunities for debate. The Opposition would do well to explain to the House which of those debates they consider to be unimportant to the millions in the country who are relying on us to improve their lives.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Leader of the House has mentioned the need to be creative. When I raised a point of order about the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, which we debated in a packed Westminster Hall on 5 July, the response was that Members need to be innovative. Well, if we have no Backbench Business time and no Opposition days, and if there is a refusal to have a votable motion, so that we cannot vote and express an opinion, how on earth can we air this important issue, which is of concern to not just me and other Opposition Members but Conservative Members, and have it resolved?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that there have already been five debates on this important issue and that there were six days of debate on the Queen's Speech where the Opposition chose the subjects they wanted to debate. There have been plenty of opportunities to debate whatever the Opposition want.

In addition, urgent Government legislation has been introduced, including the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill and the European Union (Approvals) Bill, and there are a further 22 Bills in the Queen's Speech, which will be brought forward during this Session.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The bottom line is that the Government have essentially halved the number of days of debate the Opposition can nominate. How is that good for democracy?

Andrea Leadsom: That is simply not true, and I will come on to that if the hon. Gentleman will give me the chance.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend should take no lectures from the Labour party, which, when in government, reduced Prime Minister's Question Time from twice a week to once a week and introduced the regular guillotining of Bills, thereby reducing debating time.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right to make those points. I want to be very positive and to talk about what we are doing.

We have been mindful of Back Benchers. As requested by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, we have rescheduled some of the debates that were agreed before dissolution. I am pleased that we have already found time for some of those debates, including on the ongoing challenge of seeking peaceful coexistence between Israel and the Palestinians.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): With regard to the intervention by—and I do mean this—my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), is it not the case that when the arrangements for Prime Minister's questions were changed, there was no change to the amount of time for them, because the two 15-minute sessions were consolidated into one 30-minute session, which now regularly lasts about 45 minutes, so, in fact, there is more time than ever for Prime Minister's questions?

Andrea Leadsom: I would certainly agree that, under your watchful eye, Mr Speaker, Prime Minister's questions has become quite a lengthy experience, which I am sure we are all the better for.

Most Select Committee Chairs have now been elected, and elections to the Committees themselves will take place as soon as possible. The House will also know that sitting Fridays have been announced.

Given the outrage affected by the Opposition, we would be forgiven for thinking that there had been no opportunities at all for them to have their voices heard. However, in addition to the six days given to the debate on the Queen's Speech out of the 18 sitting days in this term so far—that is 40% of the time—where topics for debate were, of course, chosen by the Opposition, there have been two debates under Standing Order No. 24, six urgent questions, 14 Adjournment debates in this Chamber, 15 departmental oral question times, 16 oral statements, 24 debates in Westminster Hall and—I am sure the shadow Leader of the House would not wish to forget this—the four feisty business question sessions we have had in this Chamber.

It is therefore certainly not the Government's fault if the Opposition have failed to make good use of those many opportunities. They will be aware that an Opposition day debate has been offered via the usual channels for after the summer recess, in September.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House says that the Committees will be elected in due course. The Labour party has carried out its elections today, and those Committee members will be in place tonight. How soon can we expect the Government to sort out their side of the equation?

Andrea Leadsom: As soon as possible, and within the normal timeframe for establishing Select Committees.

The Opposition make a comparison with the 2015 general election, saying that, by the summer recess following the vote, Select Committees had been established and Opposition days had been held. However, the election in 2015 was in May, not June, and there were 32 sitting days between the Queen's Speech and the summer recess. Between the Queen's Speech and the summer recess this year, there will have been only 18 sitting days.

Let us look at our record on providing Opposition day debates versus the record when the Labour party was in government. Let us use the Opposition's assumption that each Session should be one year and that there should be 20 Opposition days each year. On their reckoning, between 1997 and 2010, when Labour was in office, Opposition parties were short by 35 Opposition days. By the same calculation, and using the Opposition's assessment, they have had one more day than their allocation between 2010 and today.

Chris Bryant: I have to say that it is a bit rich of the Leader of the House to give us the number of days between the Queen's Speech and the recess, since the Government set the date of the recess and delayed the date of the Queen's Speech. In 1997, how many days were there before the recess? Two. In 2001? One. In 2005? Five. In 2010? Two—and that is when the Conservatives had to cobble together a ludicrous Government. In 2015? Five. So she is talking through a hole in her head. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: It may have been a case of mistaken identity, but I thought I detected a Somerset burr in the voice saying, “Order.” My judgment is that what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has said was not disorderly; whether it was in entirely good taste is a matter for people's judgment. However, the Leader of the House is a robust character, and I think she is unfazed. The only other observation I make at this stage—the Leader of the House has referred to me a number of times—is that, just as a point of fact, the tears in my eyes on Centre Court yesterday were tears of joy for the greatest of all time.

Andrea Leadsom: I felt sure, Mr Speaker, that were you to feel a bit emotional today, they would of course be tears of joy as well, so I am not inconsistent. As for the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), he may be technically correct, but he is extremely rude.

In the extended parliamentary Session of 2010-12, we provided extra days for private Members' Bills. The Standing Orders set out that electing the Chairs of Select Committees is a matter for political parties to agree on. Again, Chairs of Select Committees have been elected just as quickly as in previous Parliaments.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): It seems to me that this is descending into a rather pointless debate about what may or may not have happened in the past. Surely it is possible to get to an agreement. It is right

that we give the Opposition a chance to hold the Government to account. Surely, through the usual channels, we can ensure that, despite the fact that we have a two-year rather than a one-year Session, in broad equivalence they get the same number of supply days.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is indeed what we are talking about, which is why I opened my remarks by saying that this is absolutely business as usual.

Victoria Atkins: Does my right hon. Friend share my regret that this debate about debates is potentially eating into the time to talk about the very serious issue of intimidation of parliamentary candidates in the election? I see that Opposition Members are sniggering. Do they not take democracy as seriously as me? I am concerned that we are eating into that important debate later this evening to talk about our diaries.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. This is a debate about process. It is not about material things, and it is certainly not about things that our constituents care about.

In terms of respecting parliamentary supremacy—something that I know is very dear to you, Mr Speaker—let us look at the performance of my party versus the Opposition. Who created the Backbench Business Committee in 2010? My party. Who brought in elections to Select Committees? My party. Who introduced the e-petition system? My party. So in fact this Government—this party—have done far more for parliamentary supremacy than the Opposition have. So far, over 10 million people have signed various petitions, the Government have formally responded to 264 petitions, and 20 petitions have been scheduled for debate. The Government have also responded to 162 urgent questions in this House since 2015 alone.

This urgent debate is the result of party politics at its worst. Nearly 13 million people voted for Labour to come to this place and represent them. I do not believe they were voting for petty time-wasting by Labour. All the Opposition are doing is talking about process when what is important is policy. The Opposition say they want to talk about tuition fees—well, let us talk about tuition fees. We are committed to supporting all young people to reach their full potential, whether that means going to university, starting an apprenticeship, or taking up a technical qualification. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are now going to university at a record rate—up by 43% since 2009. But Labour Members are in a total mess over the pledge they made to students just seven days before the general election—a pledge they have now admitted would cost £100 billion, and was just an “ambition”, according to the shadow Chancellor. They should be upfront with young people about their plans. Is it still their policy to cancel all student debt, or was it a pre-election scam?

Or perhaps Labour Members would like to talk about the economy. This Government have shown determination to live within our means so that the next generation are not saddled with the debts of 13 years of Labour recklessness. We inherited the largest peacetime deficit ever from Labour, but since—

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This debate is about Opposition days and our ability to hold the Government to account. If the Leader of the House wants debates about the subjects she is now referring to, why does she not allow them rather than diverting from what this debate is about?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is aware that Front Benchers are usually accorded a modest latitude in developing their arguments, hence I have allowed a modest latitude, but I think the Leader of the House will shortly return to the thrust of the matter under debate—not what might have been under debate but what is under debate. I know that she will focus on that; I am perfectly sanguine on that score.

Chris Bryant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not think there is a “further”, but I will indulge the hon. Gentleman.

Chris Bryant: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House has said quite categorically that she believes that the debate we are having now is completely irrelevant and the far more important one will take place later on. I just wonder, because I noticed the number of Conservative Members who stood to catch your eye earlier, whether you think that more Conservative Members would like to take part in this debate or in the debate that the Government have scheduled for later tonight.

Mr Speaker: The answer is that lots of Members are wanting to speak today. In this debate, which can last for a maximum of three hours, a lot of Government Back Benchers wish to speak. I am keen to accommodate both Government Back Benchers and Opposition Back Benchers, and I am certainly keen to accommodate would-be maiden speakers. Therefore, if we can now minimise points of frustration and focus on the debate, I think that would be beneficial to all concerned.

Andrea Leadsom: I was going to continue, Mr Speaker, to talk about the way we have sought to improve our ability to live within our means, and the amazing employment record of this Government, in an effort to get the Opposition to focus on what really matters. Nevertheless, I will not bother to talk about employment, but will continue on to the Opposition’s desire to consider process.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend note the glorious irony that the Opposition have called for an emergency debate, and as soon as we debate anything they wish it to be curtailed?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, I think my hon. Friend speaks for all of us in his observation.

I have outlined the many opportunities that the Opposition have had since the general election to debate in this House. In four days, the House rises for recess, but not before there are many further opportunities to put their views on the record. Today we are supposed to be debating the abuse and intimidation of candidates during the general election. Members on both sides of this House have been victims of vile abuse from anarchists

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

and hard-left activists, but obviously Labour Members are not interested. It is now unlikely that there will be any time for that critical debate to take place today. I sincerely hope that the Leader of the Opposition, having prevented this debate, will want to condemn in the strongest language the frightening and intimidating abuse endured by many Conservative Members, as well as a number of those on his own Benches.

This Government are working towards a brighter future for our great country. We are bringing forward the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and negotiating our exit from the European Union, fulfilling the will of the British people, and working to make a success of Brexit. We are putting in place a strong programme of social and economic legislation, introducing measures that will improve mental health provision, build the industries of tomorrow, and stamp out extremism and terrorism. These are issues that matter—

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have to take it on trust, but I hope it is a point of order rather than a point of frustration.

Mr Jones: I know that you were deep in conversation, Mr Speaker, but the Leader of the House has returned to issues that have nothing to do with this debate. She is just giving a long list of what this Government have achieved. If she really wants those issues to be properly aired, why will she not give us Opposition day debates so that we can vote on them?

Mr Speaker: I note the hon. Gentleman's point. As far as I can tell—I hope I sense correctly—the Leader of the House is very likely approaching her peroration. A lot of Members wish to speak and there is usually a rough equivalence between the length of time taken by the Opposition spokesperson and the Government spokesperson. At this stage the right hon. Lady is in order, but I imagine that she is probably nearing the conclusion of her remarks.

Andrea Leadsom rose—

Mr Jones: Go on, get on with it!

Mr Speaker: Order. There was no need for that. It is rather ungracious of the hon. Gentleman to yell from a sedentary position. He can always adopt a gentle burr, like the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), which is altogether more seemly.

Andrea Leadsom: Opposition Members are certainly not being very charming this evening, are they? I was trying to outline some of the issues that really matter to the people of our great country. It is in the interests of our country that this Government provide certainty, continuity and control, as we forge a new and successful future for the whole of the United Kingdom. I hope that colleagues agree that the safety, welfare and prosperity of this country should be our priority, and I will work with all willing colleagues across the House to achieve that.

6.21 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): We welcome this debate and share the concerns about the arrangements for this parliamentary Session over the next two years. We agree that clarity is needed on the scheduling of Back-Bench and Opposition business.

Since we have come back, the pace at which the House's usual arrangements have been put back in place has been woeful and unsatisfactory. There are only three full days left until the long summer recess, yet this House's Select Committees are still not up and running, nor do we know the arrangements for its Standing and Statutory Instrument Committees. Given that they are going to be particularly burdened by the repeal Bill, we need clarity and certainty about them.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I think I heard earlier that neither the Scottish National party nor the Labour party has yet agreed on its own members for Select Committees—

Valerie Vaz: We have!

Lucy Frazer: I am sorry if I am in error, but it is only recently that it has been possible to agree on Select Committee membership and we are about to go into recess.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for her intervention, because I can say with certainty that we are ready to supply SNP names for Select Committee membership, and I am pretty certain that the Labour party is in the same position.

You made a generous offer last week, Mr Speaker, to help facilitate arrangements for any political party that is finding it difficult to arrange its membership of Select Committees, but I do not know whether the Conservative party has approached you to fulfil that promise. It is not the Labour party or the SNP that is holding up the creation of Select Committees, but the Conservative party, so I ask it to make use of your very kind offer.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Could it be that so many Conservative Members want to take part in Select Committees that an election is required, and that a similar level of interest does not exist among Opposition parties?

Pete Wishart: I say candidly to the hon. Gentleman: get on with it, for goodness' sake. The Select Committees should be up and running before the summer recess. If the Conservatives cannot do that themselves, they should accept your offer to help them arrange it, Mr Speaker.

Kevin Brennan: I shall call the hon. Gentleman my hon. Friend. The Labour party has already held elections for Select Committee places. If the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) thinks the Conservative party is going to have difficulties arranging its own membership, we could provide it with election observers and tellers.

Pete Wishart: I shall call the hon. Gentleman my hon. Friend, too. He makes a very good suggestion. How about we make use of the Office of the Speaker? We could send observers along to help facilitate the Conservative party's arrangements; and then let us get on with it, for goodness' sake. We are three days away from the summer recess. Let us get these things in place.

Sir Edward Leigh: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman because I like him.

Sir Edward Leigh: The SNP was granted the Chairs of two Select Committees. I cannot quite understand how it was that Members of all the other parties were entitled to vote for different candidates, which was very democratic, but SNP Members were given just one candidate for each post, which seems rather Stalinist. Can the hon. Gentleman explain that?

Pete Wishart: That is because they were superb candidates, particularly the nominee for Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I cannot resist the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman has left out the amazing abilities of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil).

Pete Wishart: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has reminded me of that. How could I forget my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar?

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: This will be the last intervention I take for a while, because we need to make some progress.

Chris Bryant: I just wanted to say that votes are still being cast for Labour membership of the Foreign Affairs Committee, so if any Labour Members have not yet voted, they have until 8.30 to do so. [*Interruption.*]

Pete Wishart: I think I am grateful for that intervention. It seems to have energised Conservative Members, so it must have been particularly good.

It is not as if this Government have been over-exercised or energised by business thus far. Perhaps unfairly, this Parliament has already been dubbed the zombie Parliament, but I think that that comparison gives the flesh-eating undead a bad name. This is turbo-charged political zombie-ism, but a curious type of zombie-ism, because the Government are not only tearing flesh from the public but starting to consume themselves. If we look around Whitehall, we see that what passes for normal discourse among Secretaries of State amounts to briefing and counter-briefing. I say to the Leader of the House that this is what happens when Governments do nothing—bad stuff happens. This is a Government at war with itself, where briefing and counter-briefing take precedence as they all jostle and compete to be the next captain of the SS Tory Titanic.

According to one anonymous Minister, the Chancellor is trying to “stymie” Brexit. If only he would get on with it! Apparently he believes that Brexiteers are a “bunch of smarmy pirates”, whatever a smarmy pirate is. I have an image in my head of a cross between Captain Pugwash and Jack Sparrow re-enacting the battle of the Thames between Nigel Farage and Bob Geldof. I do not know what a smarmy pirate is but—shiver me timbers and pieces of eight—I wouldn’t mind being one myself.

The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) says that the plotters should “just shut up for goodness’ sake”,

which would deprive this House of so much comedy value. The International Trade Secretary says that members of the Cabinet “should drink less prosecco”. And there was I thinking, “Cheap prosecco? Surely only the finest champagne is good enough for my Conservative friends.” According to the Transport Secretary, there is nothing to see here, concluding:

“We’re not a group of clones.”

Well, thank goodness for that. It is no wonder that the Government do not want scrutiny when they are in such chaos and turmoil.

I agree with the Leader of the House on one thing, namely the question of public enthusiasm for this debate. During my surgeries over the weekend, I did not notice any banners calling for more Opposition days for the Labour party or for sorting out the membership of statutory Committees. The issue is important, however, and I think that our constituents expect us to come down here to ensure that we arrange the optimal conditions for debate and scrutiny and get on with the job of ensuring that this Government are held to account.

This is a very different type of Parliament. Perhaps that will excuse the Government’s behaviour in not getting things back in place. I do not think there has been such uncertainty about a Parliament lasting a full term since the 1970s and the days of Callaghan and Wilson. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has proved to be possibly the biggest waste of parliamentary time in history. It was supposed to give certainty to the scheduling of parliamentary debates, but it was always going to fail when a Government wanted to have an early election, assisted by an Opposition who would not be able to resist.

We therefore have a Parliament and Government on political life support, always requiring emergency treatment and always vulnerable to the infection of events as they try to define some sense of purpose and meaning. The Government’s condition is all their own fault. After hubristically and unnecessarily calling an early election to try to take advantage of the crisis and chaos that they observed in the Labour Opposition, they have returned humbled, embarrassed, diminished, chaotic and in turmoil.

This is most definitely a House of minorities, and the way in which we conduct our business and scrutinise legislation must reflect that. Arrangements must be put in place to ensure that the new political arithmetic across the House is observed. That is why it has been profoundly disappointing that instead of rising properly to the challenge, the Government have done all they can to frustrate, delay and thwart the creation of all the arrangements that are essential for proper scrutiny in these new conditions. The Government’s main strategy has been to try to make their legislative programme as opaque, meaningless and uncontentious as possible. They hope that we will get bored and take little interest in it, so that they will not lose any votes in Parliament.

The only thing that will be contentious—the one big deal of this parliamentary term—will be Brexit. Of course, the Government are unburdened in that regard, too. When it comes to the main themes of the Government’s hard Brexit, the Labour Opposition agree with practically everything that the Government want to achieve, whether the leaving of the single market, the leaving of the customs

[*Pete Wishart*]

union or the ending of freedom of movement. The Government will therefore have no difficulty getting their Brexit business through, on top of a legislative programme that is so light it is almost totally opaque.

We also have to look at what was agreed in the early days of this Parliament. One of the most concerning and damaging of all the initiatives that the Government have embarked on is the appalling deal that they struck, right at the outset, with the Democratic Unionist party. That deal was agreed behind closed doors, and the House has not had the opportunity to debate it, scrutinise it properly or consider its consequences—not least how it turns the normal and usual funding allocations for the nations of the United Kingdom on their head. This is a deal designed to buy the Government their majority, and it has unfortunately set the tone for this Parliament and defined the Government's contemptuous approach to their business.

The other thing that has to go, very early on, is the appalling and divisive English votes for English laws procedure, which is opposed and loathed by every political party in this House apart from the governing Tories. It is clear that it no longer secures a parliamentary majority in this House, and it is ridiculous that in order to get their business through, the Government have to rely on a party that is subject to the constraints of EVEL. EVEL is disruptive to the House, and it divides the membership of this House by geography and nationality. Its days should surely be numbered. Let us get shot of it from our Standing Orders and see whether we can, through debate, secure a solution on which we can achieve consensus. Let us get something that reflects proper scrutiny and attention and serves all the nations of the United Kingdom.

We need to get down to business. It is simply unacceptable that the Select Committees will not be up and running before the recess. We have had a little exchange about where we are in the logjam of creating the Select Committees. I hope that the Leader of the House will take the matter seriously, so that we can get on and do it. We have to have the Standing Committees in place. Because we have no Standing Committees, Bills cannot receive proper consideration at Committee stage, so the Government have had to bring Bills before Committees of the whole House. Three Bills have been subject to that procedure. No Statutory Instrument Committees have been set up, and, as a result, we will be considering another statutory instrument after this debate. The situation is clearly unsatisfactory, and it is unacceptable for it to continue.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We have all been through a process of election. If a prospective candidate does not get their name in in time, it is tough; the election goes on without them. It is not postponed until the end of the summer to give the candidates time to sort themselves out. Should we look at something similar in the makeup of Select Committees: if the governing party does not bother to put names down for Committees, the Committees just go ahead and meet without them, so that they can get on with the job?

Pete Wishart: That is an elegant solution to a very solvable problem, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for suggesting it. Perhaps the Government are listening. I hope that some action will be taken in the next few days to resolve the matter.

My understanding—the Leader of the House can correct me if I am wrong—is that we have not got the Standing Committees up and running because there is a dispute about the arithmetic. As I understand it, the Government have nine places, the Labour Opposition have seven places and we have two places. That would properly reflect the political arithmetic of this House, suggesting that it is a House of minorities, and it would mean that the Government had to work just that little bit harder in Committee to get their business through.

What would be clearly unacceptable—this seems to be happening, and I hope it stops soon—would be for the Government to subvert the Committee stage by either bringing legislation to a Committee of the whole House, here in the Chamber, or looking to make all their amendments on Report. That would fly in the face of nearly everything we understand about the normal business of getting legislation through Parliament.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point. Everybody knows that the most inadequate part of the whole legislative process is Report stage, where the Government can put down amendments that are never even debated.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. She probably shares my concern about what would happen if that came to pass, and the inadequacy of Report stage. We would have everything baled into one, with Report, Third Reading and, probably, statements and other business on the same day. Intricate, important pieces of legislation require proper scrutiny in the proper Committees of this House, and it is incumbent on the Government to put that process in place. Any attempt to subvert the normal arrangements for Bills to go to Committee is clearly unacceptable, and I hope that the House will reject any such attempt.

We have heard quite a lot about how things are normally set up. I am almost disappointed that the hon. Member for—Chris Bryant, whatever his constituency is. [*Interruption.*] For Rhondda. I am almost disappointed that he is no longer here, because he is a keen student of the subject, and I think he actually gave us some figures. The Leader of the House said that we were in an unusual situation because we had had a June election. I was elected in 2001—I think you were elected before me, Mr Speaker—and I remember that in 2001 we had a June election, but all the Standing Committees and all the Select Committees were in place by the summer recess. The election in 2001 took place on 7 June, the Queen's Speech was held on 20 June and all the Select Committees were in place and functioning by 19 July.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The reason for that is that in those days it was a stitch-up by the Whips. Now we elect the members of Select Committees, and that is the key difference.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, because he reminds me of something that happened during the establishment of the Select Committees in 2001. He is right; it was a stitch-up by the Blair Whips, and he will remember when they tried to remove Gwyneth Dunwoody and Donald Anderson from the chairmanship of two Select Committees. That held up the creation of the Select Committees, but we still managed to get them

in place. There is absolutely no reason why the same cannot happen now. The example of the year of 2001 is a good one.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) when it comes to Opposition days and the setting aside of time for Back-Bench business. It looks as though Back-Bench business and private Members' Bills will be about the most interesting features of this parliamentary Session.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)
Hear, hear!

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend has a particularly good private Member's Bill, and I encourage as many Members as possible to come along and listen to him speak about it. Back-Bench business and private Members' Bills will probably be our most interesting business, given the laxity that we are going to see from Government Members, and we must have the proper time and arrangements for such business.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Leader of the House spoke earlier about giving the House more time for private Members' Bills. Is that not an almost pointless exercise unless the Government reform how private Members' Bills go through the House, and unless they get their own Members to stop stymieing them?

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend is spot on. I share his frustration, as I think most in the Scottish National party do, about the way in which private Members' Bills are progressed through the House. It is clearly unsatisfactory. I remember the private Member's Bill sponsored by my colleague John Nicolson, which was stymied by the Government even though we had the necessary numbers here. The way in which certain Members of this House—none of them are in their place at this point—do all they can to talk out and filibuster private Members' Bills is a disgrace to this House. Our constituents expect better than that. When their Members of Parliament are lucky enough, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) has been, to secure the opportunity to introduce a private Member's Bill, it is right and proper for them to expect those Bills to be properly debated in the House. I hope at some point we will be able to reform the process.

We support what the hon. Member for Walsall South said about the sittings for private Members' Bills. Of course the number should be doubled and I really hope the Government do that.

There has to be a proper arrangement and a proper understanding about the time allocated for Opposition days. The Labour shadow Leader of the House was absolutely right that we are entitled to three Opposition days per parliamentary Session and we now expect six, given that it is a two-year Session. I hope the Leader of the House will confirm that.

We have to get all these things worked out. The arrangements of the House are clearly unsatisfactory and there are lots of things we need to do. I spent a couple of weeks in the usual channels before my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) was put in place. I saw how the usual channels are working just now. There seems to be a misunderstanding

about how the different parties' requirements and expectations of this Parliament are to be met. I encourage the Leader of the House and the Whips Office to get a better grasp of the new reality of this House—this House of minorities, where nobody has a majority—and ensure that our business is equipped, shaped and designed to accommodate that new reality.

This zombie Parliament must get up and working. It must be allowed to do its work. It must allow the optimal conditions for scrutiny and empower us, as Members of Parliament, to do the work that our constituents sent us here to do. For goodness' sake, let's get on with it and let's do it.

6.41 pm

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I am disappointed that time will not allow me to contribute to the debate on the intimidation of general election candidates. Nevertheless, I will contribute fully when the opportunity arises, drawing on my own experiences. I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who is from a neighbouring constituency.

It is a great privilege to be here today, delivering my maiden speech and representing my home constituency of Angus. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Mike Weir, who served the people of Angus very well in his 16 years in the House. He was a prominent campaigner to save the local post offices in the constituency, and in the House he took on the role of Chief Whip for his party. I wish him all the very best in his future endeavours.

It would be remiss of me not to mention also the previous Conservative and Unionist MP for Angus, the late Lord Fraser of Carmyllie, as he was known after being ennobled in 1989. He was not just a great local voice for his area in this House, but had a remarkable legal career.

The diverse constituency of Angus, nestled north of Dundee and south of Aberdeenshire, incorporates the most beautiful, dramatic coastlines to the east and picturesque, tranquil glens to the north-west. The five main towns are Forfar, Kirriemuir, Montrose, Arbroath and Brechin, where I was born, brought up and educated. There are a number of villages and rural communities as well.

Unfortunately, it is the residents and businesses of those remote areas who have suffered most significantly from the lack of mobile and broadband coverage. With the current coverage roll-out being below the national average, it is unsurprising that this issue has emerged at every single constituency surgery I have held to date. I will use my voice here in Westminster to ensure that the Scottish Government deliver connectivity right across Angus, ensuring that residents and businesses are not left behind because of where they choose to reside and operate.

From my agricultural roots, I understand the importance of this industry to Angus and to Scotland. With the area producing 25% of Scottish soft fruit and 30% of the country's potatoes, agriculture remains a significant contributor to the local economy. Local farmers understand the increasing importance of diversification and Angus is home to many successful projects, ranging from renewables to the first potato-based vodka, Ogilvy vodka, which is distilled locally near the village of Glamis.

[*Kirstene Hair*]

Glamis itself incorporates the famous residence of Glamis castle, the childhood home of the late Queen Mother. I recently attended the annual Glamis prom, one of the many excellent events that are held in the grounds of the castle, attracting thousands of people from across Scotland.

Attractions across Angus entice tourists from far and wide, whether it is to visit the many historic houses and gardens, to try their hand at golf on some of the best known courses, or to get involved in a variety of outdoor pursuits. Montrose port will welcome its first cruise ship, which is due to dock next year—a further great boost for our local economy and tourism industry. Nevertheless, I am incredibly aware that there is a power of work to be done to further promote the area, to support the current offering and to ensure that no one slips north into Aberdeenshire without tasting a Forfar bridle en route.

The businesses throughout Angus range from the local to the global. We have engineering and manufacturing, oil and gas, textiles and a highly regarded food and drink offering. A host of global businesses operate across every corner of Angus in key sectors, including pharmaceuticals giant GlaxoSmithKline; the Montrose textile manufacturer Wilkie in Kirriemuir; the marmalade, preserves and curds exporter Mackays in Arbroath; the textile innovator Don & Low in Forfar; and the design and engineering specialists Hydrus in Brechin. They are supported by a strong network of local businesses, which collectively are the lifeblood of our local economy, providing the jobs that Angus so desperately needs. As a Government, we must support them wherever possible, enabling both prosperity and longevity.

Angus has much to be proud of. However, like many places, it has concerns that my constituents have asked me to stand up and represent them on. The rate of unemployment, particularly among the youth, continues to lie above the national average due to several factors. The north-east oil and gas industry, which many residents in Angus rely on heavily, still has positivity, with new oil fields emerging, but the steady decline in recent years has had a large impact on the livelihoods of residents and on businesses throughout Angus. My north-east colleagues and I will work together with the industry wherever possible to support them.

As we face the challenge of Brexit, I am confident that the Scottish farming and fishing communities have the resilience to remain one of the key pillars of our economy. One of the greatest opportunities from Brexit is the chance to build a support system that works for Angus and for all areas of our United Kingdom.

The political landscape in Angus has demonstrated a clear shift in recent years. In the 2014 referendum on independence, we recorded an above average no vote. In the last three elections, there has been a considerable vote swing towards the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party. Those were strong messages to Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP that the time for constitutional trouble-making was over. Make no mistake, I and my Scottish Conservative, Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democratic colleagues are as patriotic as my Scottish National party colleagues. We now need to ask them to remove the threat of uncertainty over Scotland's economy and Scotland's people. No ifs, no buts—a second divisive independence referendum should be taken off the table.

I remain optimistic for the future of Angus and the extensive Tay cities deal, which will directly support those who live and work in Angus. The planned £1.8 billion investment will include key programmes specifically for Angus, such as the Hospitalfield future plan; the Dundecom public-private partnership, which will create a major decommissioning centre in Scotland; and, of course, the ambitious investment corridor from Montrose to the A90 that will enable the delivery of much-needed infrastructure, stimulating major economic growth in north Angus. I look forward to working with the UK Government and all stakeholders to drive forward the Tay cities deal and ensure that it delivers for Angus.

As the Member of Parliament for Angus, my mission is to ensure that I am the strongest of local champions, representing my home turf with the greatest of integrity and never with complacency. As a staunch Unionist, I will continue to fight with every fibre of my being to keep Scotland as part of our wonderful United Kingdom. Quite simply, we are stronger together and weaker apart. I would also like to make it clear that I am here to help all my constituents, no matter how or, indeed, if they voted. I very much look forward to standing up for Angus and for Scotland in this Chamber on many more occasions to come.

Mr Speaker: Very warm congratulations to the hon. Lady. We look forward to hearing her and getting to know her in this House.

6.49 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The hon. Member for Angus (*Kirstene Hair*) made what could be termed a model maiden speech. She was robust when necessary, she was fluent, humorous and generous to her predecessors, and she stood up for what she sees as the vital interests of her constituency. I am sure we all look forward to hearing further contributions from her. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (*Valerie Vaz*) for securing this debate, because it is both timely and necessary.

During my time in the House, the role of Members of Parliament has been seen as either to support or to oppose the Government of the day. People do not always slavishly follow the Whip in the House, and rightly so on occasions. Occasionally, issues of conscience have to be decided—for example, on end-of-life decisions or stem cell research—and it is right and proper that free votes should be held on those. On other occasions—for example, on our relationship with the European Union—people's views are perhaps too distinctive to be easily bracketed within the confines of party loyalty.

As we know, the outcome of the last general election changed the political arithmetic of this House. Until such time as we have a further general election, the potential power held by each of us, including the hon. Member for Angus, is greater than it has been in the many years that I have sat in this House. I have two questions on that point. Are we willing to use that power—in my case to bring about greater fairness and address injustices, some of which I will refer to shortly—and can we look not at what we have been in the past as a House, but at what we could become?

I will be brief, Mr Speaker, because I know you want us to stick to the issue at hand more closely, but I want to say a word about party allegiance and how it works

in the context of the House. I have spent all my adult life in the Labour party, and I remain in it because I share its values on equality and social justice. That is not to say, however, that we as a party have a monopoly on virtue. I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House share those values, at least to some degree. I have one further point of a political nature: because the Government have no majority, the usual argument about having a mandate for measures contained in the manifesto is weak to the point of irrelevance.

I also want to say a word about the right hon. and hon. Members from the Democratic Unionist party. Since entering into a supply and confidence arrangement with the Conservative party, they have, perhaps in some ways understandably, been heavily criticised in some quarters. However, that agreement does not cover every measure that the Government may bring forward. Knowing some of the DUP Members as I do, I am confident that on some issues we can achieve co-operation with them and, certainly on some of the issues that I feel strongly about, I think they will share a similar outlook. It is therefore not a given that on every occasion the Government can rely on their support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South, the shadow Leader of the House, has already referred to the injustice of the women born in the 1950s and the age at which they are entitled to their state pension. Many of us, on both sides of the House—including, I suspect, Democratic Unionists—support the WASPI campaign. If we as a House are firm enough in our resolve on that subject, we could bring about a fair solution.

I also hope we can all agree that the growing inequality in our country is unfair and corrosive. Wherever we look, whether at access to housing, the life chances of young people or insecurity of employment, we see the stark reality of those consequences—reliance on food banks, growing homelessness and unacceptable regional disparities in income and support for public services. That also means that we need to take a more generous approach to public sector pay.

If the House can adapt to the new realities of our power and influence, we can try to resolve those problems. However, in order to realise that power and influence, we first need to take more control of our own procedures and achieve much greater agency in the legislative process. In my view, that means empowering Select Committees to produce White Papers and draft Bills, and giving the Procedure Committee and the Backbench Business Committee control over the programming and timing of private Members' Bills. It would also mean that the Government were held accountable for some motions that were carried by the House with cross-party support. In other words, they should be bound by some decisions of this House in some circumstances.

Finally, I am sure that the Government will object to such changes in the way that we function on the grounds that the House does not take responsibility for the financial consequences of its decisions. However, the Government will have to put that argument on each occasion and Members of this House will have to assume responsibility for the decisions they take. In the recent past, the reputation and standing of politicians in western democracies, not least our own, have fallen alarmingly, the consequences of which we see in the rejection of long-standing political certainties. However, the arithmetic of this Parliament presents us with an

opportunity to take our reputations, both collectively and individually, into our own hands. Do we have the confidence to realise what we could become? Surely we have a duty to at least try.

6.57 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who delivered a superb maiden speech. It is a great pleasure to see her in her place today, and I look forward to hearing further such contributions from her in the months and years to come. It really was a fantastic start to her parliamentary career.

I fear that today's debate has been something of a missed opportunity. No institution, let alone Parliament, should be set in aspic. We need a strong parliamentary institution, and if that is what it is, it should evolve. It should have adult conversations about the way it conducts itself. There are strong arguments for change in the way the parliamentary business is scheduled, but I am afraid that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) did not make them, and nor indeed did the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart).

That is a great shame, because debate on improvements in this place, including improvements to scheduling, is what our constituents would expect us to cover, despite what some hon. Members were implying earlier. That should be what we discuss, and the focus should be on what would make us more productive and what would reduce the costs of Parliament, which are still considerable and not to be ignored. Perhaps the Opposition should have focused this opportunity on areas where real change is needed—change that has already been recommended by publications such as “The Good Parliament” report and in the work of the all-party group on women in Parliament.

I want to focus briefly on three of those changes, which I hope those on the Opposition Front Bench and, indeed, the Leader of the House will consider in a little more detail.

First, I should like a Division hour to be introduced. That would give all of us parliamentarians an awful lot more certainty about how we can plan our days. At present, we suffer from the archaic system of voting at the end of debates, and Members are very uncertain about when the votes may come, particularly during the Report stages of Bills. Division hours, which are common in the European and Scottish Parliaments, might give us the extra productivity that we now expect regularly from our constituents when they are going about their everyday work.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The right hon. Lady makes an excellent suggestion. Does she agree that we should also get rid of the antiquated system of walking through the Lobbies to vote, and follow other modern European Parliaments such as the Scottish Parliament by introducing a press-button system for Members who are present?

Mrs Miller: We shall have to agree to disagree, because I think that going through the Division Lobby is one way in which Members of Parliament can talk to each other. It can be cohesive. We can talk to Ministers about the policies that they are developing, for instance. I do

[*Mrs Miller*]

not support the idea of electronic or remote voting; I think that the present system creates more of a team within Parliament.

I do not support the idea that a vote at the end of every day, sometimes in the wee small hours of the morning, gives anyone the edge. It gives no one the edge. It feels as if we were re-enacting the D-day landings, and trying to adopt guerrilla tactics, which, in my 12 years of being in Parliament, have never worked. They have never changed the outcome of a debate, or the outcome of a vote. I urge the Government to think about how they can modernise that aspect of our parliamentary schedule—which brings me to my next point.

I am reliably told by some Members who have been here much longer than I have that late sittings are an integral part of parliamentary life. I know that they are not as late as they have been in past generations, but we are still regularly here until 10 pm, as we will be tonight. We may not mind that, which is absolutely fine, but there are consequences. The late votes that we decided to have cost the taxpayer £5 million over the last five years, and those were staff costs alone: the additional costs of policing and security must at least double the amount. At what point will we, as a Parliament, realise that sitting until 10 pm, or voting at 10 pm, on a Monday is not an integral part of the work that we do? When will we realise that we could change that, and save taxpayers money? We could also improve the quality of life of the staff who work here, which we currently seem to disregard when we make decisions about the scheduling of our sitting hours.

Kevin Brennan: This matter has been considered many times over the years, but does the right hon. Lady accept that one of the issues about Mondays is the need for Members to travel here from far corners of the kingdom, many of which are much further away from London than her constituency?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am very fortunate not to have the long commute that he may have from his constituency. Ultimately, however, what I am saying is that while we could decide to continue to have debates into the evening, voting earlier in the day would mean that, from the point of view of parliamentary staff who must currently be on standby throughout the evening—and who, of course, receive compensation as a result—we would be at least one step further towards modernising the shape of this place.

Kevin Brennan: I am not sure that I heard the right hon. Lady correctly. Was she suggesting that we should have the votes before the debates had finished?

Mrs Miller: No. The hon. Gentleman's party might do that, but we would never suggest it in ours. The hon. Gentleman is obviously familiar with the concept of the deferred division, and he will, I am sure, have looked at what happens in Europe and Scotland.

I was rather disappointed that the hon. Member for Walsall South did not talk about the importance of changing parliamentary scheduling to protect the work of Select Committees. There has been a great deal of

debate about the importance of constituting Select Committees, but, having chaired a Select Committee for the last two years—and I am very pleased to have been re-elected to that position—I can say that much of our work can come to naught as a result of the scheduling of parliamentary business in the House. Indeed, my Select Committee's trip in connection with the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women was scrapped as a result of a vote here, because we do not have something as simple as a proxy system for Members of Parliament.

Rather than talking simply about Opposition day debates, will Opposition Members please talk about other important aspects of scheduling? It is not “job done” when it comes to the way in which our Parliament operates, but today's debate has risked obscuring that. I think it a shame that some Members have failed to focus on the real issues of the scheduling of parliamentary business. I hope that Labour Front Benchers will support some of the important changes that I have suggested, so that we can give the House a more modern face, and perhaps by doing so attract a wider cross-section of Members of Parliament in the future.

7.5 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech during this debate. It is an important debate, which goes straight to the heart of the kind of Parliament that we are going to be. Will it be a Parliament that stifles debate and scrutiny, or will it be a Parliament that is accountable to its Opposition and openly democratic? I know which Parliament my constituents would like.

When I was first selected as the candidate for Battersea, 11 weeks ago, many believed that I would not or could not win. That is why it fills me with great pleasure that the people of Battersea chose me to be their Member of Parliament. It is a huge honour for me, and I will serve my constituents to the best of my ability. My family played a vital role in supporting me during the campaign, and I will be forever grateful to them for the sacrifices that they made to help me to be elected.

Before I go on, let me pay tribute to my predecessor, Jane Ellison, for the work that she did in trying to halt the practice of female genital mutilation. I do not share Jane's politics, but when it comes to this truly important cause, she leaves a proud legacy. We are both lucky women to have been given the privilege of representing Battersea, a vibrant and exciting part of south London with a long and proud history. Battersea is growing, and it has so much to offer. Our iconic Battersea power station, that symbol of municipal pride, is reawakening along the river. Our transport hub, Clapham Junction, has more trains passing through it than any other station in Europe. Our fantastic green spaces are well loved and used by many, from the kids in Battersea Park to the sunbathers of Clapham Common. But, of course, it is the people of Battersea themselves who make it such a wonderful place, and it is to them that I owe most thanks.

No one should be surprised that we in Battersea, one of the youngest, most diverse and most well-educated constituencies in the country, take our politics so seriously. Battersea, like much of London, is changing rapidly, and I want to ensure that those changes benefit everyone.

In this last election, there was an increase not only in the number of young voters, but in the number of people turning out to vote for the first time, and with good reason. We are increasingly divided, not least on housing. Private rents have soared. Housing is insecure. Glistening new developments are rising up around us, but the cost of housing puts them way beyond reach. It is a scandal that people under 35 have simply been frozen out of home ownership. Too many people are confronted with housing pressures that are getting worse.

It does not have to be this way. Here in Battersea, we have some of the oldest council housing. The Shaftesbury Estate, built in the 1870s, sought to produce decent homes for working people. That spirit needs to be reignited, and we need to become pioneers again. As the Labour MP for Battersea, I know that I am standing on the shoulders of giants: politicians who were radical and way ahead of their time. It was in Battersea—Labour—in 1906 that the first working-class MP became a Government Minister, in the form of the ferocious John Burns. In 1913, we gave rise to London's first black mayor, John Archer, whose father came from Barbados and whose mother was an Irishwoman.

In 1922 Battersea became the first constituency to elect an Asian Labour Member of Parliament, the Indian radical Shapurji Saklatvala. Of course, we also had the heroic Charlotte Despard, the Anglo-Irish suffragette who dedicated her life to championing the rights of the poorest in Battersea, and whose statue can be found in the central square of Doddington estate. In 1933, at the age of 89, her last public activity was to address the crowds at a big anti-fascist rally in Trafalgar Square. Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that I have as much fire in me when I am that age.

I would also like to pay tribute to my more recent Labour predecessors: the wonderful Lord Alf Dubs, whose fight on behalf of Syrian refugees has been an inspiration to us all; and Martin Linton, who has continued to champion the rights of the Palestinian people since leaving office.

As you can see, Mr Deputy Speaker, in Battersea we are outward-looking and internationalist. It is that outward-looking spirit that I will endeavour to bring to Parliament. With the decision to leave the European Union, we face serious challenges ahead of us. It was a decision that my constituents care deeply about and voted overwhelmingly against. I will be standing up for them, drawing on that outward-looking Battersea tradition, one that values openness, tolerance, social justice and co-operation.

As you are aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was born with nystagmus, an involuntary movement of the eye, which has left me with a severe sight impairment. Living with my visual impairment, I have had to overcome many barriers, but I want to give a special thanks to my mum, who is here today. She made sure that I had a brilliant education—a brilliant state education. When I was at primary school, the headteacher thought that it would be better if I was sent to a special school, but my mother was having none of that and fought tooth and nail to keep me in mainstream education. I can safely say that I would not be the woman I am today, or an elected Member of Parliament, had it not been for her. Mum, I am truly grateful.

I have been a disability rights campaigner for most of my life. I believe that people living with a disability, like myself, should have the right to participate in society equally. They should have the right to a good education, the right to travel and access public transport, and the right to work. An important issue that is dear to my heart is the employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Still today less than half of working-age disabled people are in employment, compared with 80% of the non-disabled population. That is just not good enough. We need to change that. Over the past seven years, policies on social security and social care have disproportionately affected disabled people. When we discuss all these matters in this House, it is important that we understand and empathise with the real people who will be affected by our decisions.

I am proud to be here in this Chamber, and I am proud to be representing the people of Battersea.

7.13 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on her maiden speech and welcome her to her place. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) on her excellent maiden speech, for its wit and wisdom and its focus on connectivity to her constituency.

Democracy is a system for processing conflicts, and in this House that lies at the very heart of our debates; it is truly what we have come to this place, the mother of all Parliaments, to do. It is absolutely right that parties of all colours should be able properly to hold the Government of the day to account. Since arriving in this place in 2015, I have certainly found that the opportunities to do so have been plentiful.

It has to be said that the calling of this debate by Her Majesty's official Opposition has very little to do with representing their constituents; to my mind, it has everything to do with political point-scoring. This is truly a case of navel-gazing by the Opposition, using precious parliamentary time to do so. It is a debate about debates, which is exactly what my constituents and theirs will feel angry and aggrieved about.

The reality is that the Standing Orders state that there should be 20 Opposition days in any one Session, 17 of which are for the main Opposition party, which in this case is the Labour party—I see the Opposition Benches emptying. The Labour party was provided with those 17 days in the previous Session, which lasted less than year. It has been offered the usual Opposition day debates for the short September sittings through the usual channels.

However, I agree with the Scottish National party's Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), that voters simply do not want to see this type of debate; they want to hear us discussing what matters, which is jobs, opportunities, schools, the impact of Brexit nationwide and so much more. Interestingly, the hon. Gentleman also mentioned his frustrations with filibustering. The greatest shame tonight is that we will be unable to discuss properly the shocking incidence of nationwide abuse of candidates during the general election, which is something I raised with the Leader of the House—I received a positive reception—in applications for Back-Bench business debates. It is up to the wit and will of Members of this House to use all

[*Mims Davies*]

the tools at their disposal to ensure that the points and issues raised by their constituents are heard via co-operation, and indeed their own persistence.

As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, there have already been plentiful opportunities for Opposition Members to make representations in the Chamber on behalf of their constituents during the debates on the Queen's Speech, because the Labour party of course had six days to choose those topics. Therefore, I join right hon. and hon. Friends in their disappointment that these complaints are being made to the Government. Indeed, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) that this was purely a great opportunity for the Opposition to look at process, rather than complaints.

Kevin Brennan: I am enjoying the remarks of the hon. Lady, who debates very openly and freely. Does she not also agree with her hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who pointed out that, given that the Government have announced a two-year Session, anybody can see that it is only fair play to consider giving Her Majesty's loyal Opposition some extra Opposition days so that we can do our constitutional job of holding the Government to account?

Mims Davies: I think that there are two points to be made in response to that intervention. First, it is up to the wit and wisdom of Members to use all the tools at their disposal, and I absolutely agree that the Opposition will play every trick in the book, and why would they not? Secondly, I have found myself in a multiplicity of debates since the election, so I wonder how Opposition Members can feel so aggrieved. I have been in debates about new towns, WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—Grenfell Tower, travel infrastructure, school funding and so much more since my return to this House. I am sorry that Opposition Members have not found the variety of opportunities that my colleagues and I have found.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about attendance by some Labour Members. Perhaps she saw the coverage of last Tuesday's Westminster Hall debate on managing the public finances, which was attended by a great many Conservative Members and almost no Labour Members.

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Far from weakening our democracy, the Conservatives in this Government have strengthened it by giving our constituents more voices and by turning up at the debates that have been held.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady referred to the WASPI issue. What we want is a votable motion so that she can prove that she is with us and with the WASPI women. How will she vote when there is a votable motion?

Mims Davies: As a former chair of the all-party parliamentary group for women in Parliament, I certainly have a lot of sympathy when it comes to the WASPI women, but Government finances are difficult, as we have heard. I would certainly like us to find a way to help those most affected, and I have made those points in every single debate in which that has been possible.

We have given our constituents a chance to have a voice. One area in which we have done so is through e-petitions. I know that has happened, because I have found the voice of my constituents in my inbox, and I thank them for that. The 10 years of its operation has provided the chance for Parliament to reach into people's homes and lives, with 10 million people signing petitions and no fewer than 20 petitions being scheduled for debate. E-petitions have engaged us in various subjects in this debating Chamber, and I have been delighted about that, particularly, thinking back to my time on the Women and Equalities Committee, those on transgender issues. This Parliament is more diverse and outward-reaching than people will ever know, but the problem with debates such as this one is that we will look more enclosed.

The Government have looked to ensure that the most talented MPs from across the House get a chance to feed into in-depth policy discussions and I congratulate all the Members who have been elected to be Select Committee Chairs. By contrast, we know that during Labour's period in office the time for Prime Minister's questions was reduced and there were complaints of sofa-style government. In fact, the complaint was always that the media was told first and the Chamber second; we do not see that from this Government.

I will conclude as I know we are pressed for time. Her Majesty's Opposition have tried today to make out that there is one rule for us and another rule for everybody else. However, all of us in this Chamber are defenders of democracy, and we can see that if we use all the tools and instruments, we will have a voice for our community. So I think that Opposition Members would do well to listen to us on strengthening democracy. They should take a very serious look at taking a leaf out of our book when it comes to hearing from our constituents and reflecting what matters to them.

7.21 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): First, I want to pay tribute to the two Members who have made their maiden speeches this evening. I agree with the strong comments of the new hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) about the need to keep the UK together. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) made a moving speech, telling us how she and her mother shared a determination to make sure that she had access to mainstream education. That is a tribute to the strength of a mother's love and also to the disability rights movement and the need to make sure that people with disabilities enjoy full access to mainstream society, education, employment and so forth. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend.

This debate is not just about technicalities; it is about the national interest, and it would behove all Members of this House to remember that on 8 June this country decided it did not want to give any one party a majority position and the strength to form a majority Government. It gave Parliament the power to shape Government policy potentially, and to hold the Government to account.

It is clear that the electorate expect this Parliament to act in the national interest and not to behave in any way that is deeply tribal or which puts the party interests before the interests of the country. In that respect, I found the Leader of the House's speech deeply disappointing. She was deeply tribal in her comments

and, indeed, was losing the House to the extent that two points of order had to be made to get her back on track. It is detrimental to the interests of this House when we have a debate about parliamentary democracy itself and it descends into a tribal slanging match between the Front Benches on different aspects of Government or Opposition policy. That is not what this debate is about. This debate is also not a parliamentary game; it is about democracy and the ability of Parliament to hold the Government to account.

I want to make a quick comment about the general debate on abuse of candidates in the general election, which was to have been held tonight. I made a short contribution to the debate in Westminster Hall last week. I do believe that all it takes for evil to prosper is for good people to do nothing, and I am ready to have a debate in the main Chamber on abuse generally in society and abuse of politicians within political parties and outside them and between them. However, would it not be a good idea if Conservative Members were to join with some of us on the Opposition Benches and develop a proper application to the Backbench Business Committee so that we can have that debate in the Chamber, based on support from both sides of the House for such a debate?

The technicalities of the current debate are clear: it is about the number of Opposition day debates, Backbench Business debates and private Member's Bill days, which has barely been mentioned tonight. It is also about the timeliness of the first Opposition day debates. I have looked at the House of Commons Library research on this and it is clear that our Opposition Front Bench has a strong case. The records are clear. In the first Session of the 1997-98 Government, which lasted 18 months, there were 38 Opposition day debates, and the delay before the first Opposition day debate after a general election in the last seven or eight years has been 22 days, 22 days and 14 days. On that basis, we should have had that Opposition day debate by now.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am following what the hon. Lady is saying closely. However strong the case the Opposition have made, does the hon. Lady think it is wise to ask for an emergency debate on a debate rather than on a specific and urgent topic?

Angela Smith: That point has already been made this evening, but the point is that we are not getting the space necessary for us to raise those important topics.

Kevin Brennan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) to question the Speaker's ruling that tonight's debate is taking place on an urgent specific topic under Standing Order No. 24?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I do not think we need to worry about that.

Angela Smith: Fortunately, the intervention of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) feeds directly into my next comment. Opposition days, Backbench Business Committee days and private Member's Bill days on sitting Fridays are all very important and are the key means in this House of raising issues of concern to our voters. That precisely answers the hon. Gentleman's point.

Opposition days and private Member's Bill days give us a chance to effect real change to Government policy, yet we have had only 13 days allocated. The Backbench Business Committee is, and will be, crucial in this period of minority Government to developing the cross-party, cross-Bench relationships and the arguments necessary if we are to be effective as a Parliament in effecting real change to Government policy.

Mr Kevan Jones: This point has not really been raised in this debate, but is not the real reason why the Government are doing this the fact that there can be votes on those debates? The Government are scared of a number of individuals on their Back Benches doing what my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) said, which is voting in the national interest rather than their party's interest.

Angela Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and that was exactly the point I wanted to make.

The Prime Minister said only two weeks ago that she wanted cross-party working and a national consensus between the parties in order to serve the national interest. The Government have made a very poor start on that. If they want consensus, I am more than happy to play my part, but they need to show that they mean business and are ready to use the mechanisms of the House and to make it possible for a consensus to develop in real and meaningful terms in this Chamber. We have seen very little evidence of that so far.

I shall finish on a rather more controversial point. I believe that the real reason we are seeing so little action from the Government in providing for meaningful Opposition day debates or for legislation—there is still no Committee of Selection, and Bills are coming to the Floor of the House when they should not be doing so—is that the Government are absolutely desperate to avoid any kind of Back-Bench instability in the Commons. That is because they are so worried about the future of their own Prime Minister. The truth is that Government Front Benchers want to get beyond the conference season and beyond October to be sure that they still have this Prime Minister in No. 10. They are absolutely desperate to avoid any meaningful debate in this House, in order to shore up the Government's position. That is an appalling abuse of parliamentary democracy, and it is not in the national interest. When is this zombie Parliament going to end?

7.30 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), and I may refer to one of her comments later. As she knows, I very much respect her, having worked with her in the Council of Europe. I would like to congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on her maiden speech. Well done to her! I would also very much like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who made an absolutely wonderful speech. It is so lovely to see another young lady—a Scottish one—in the House of Commons today, so well done and thanks for your contribution.

I find it quite surprising that I am speaking in this debate. I was not going to do so, but I read the request that came through and I found that I could not stop

[*Kelly Tolhurst*]

myself. I felt that I really had to contribute. I am disappointed that the debate will mean that, sadly, we will not have time for the debate that was to follow. I am quite sad about that. I am very surprised that the Opposition have called this debate today—

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: No, I want to make some progress.

I am surprised that the Opposition are complaining about the amount of time they have had to debate issues that are important to them. Since the election, we have had six days of debate on the Queen's Speech, which many Opposition Members took part in. They had an opportunity to have their say in those debates. We have also had numerous urgent questions involving current issues and matters that are relevant to our constituents. I cannot speak about what happened before 2015, because that is when I was elected, but I have looked back over the past two years. There have been a number of debates on Government business and on important pieces of legislation which have not taken the full allocation of time because there was little appetite from the Opposition to join in. One occasion in particular takes me back.

The Children and Social Work Bill was one of the biggest pieces of legislation on children and social work for a number of years. Interestingly, it did not use up all its debating time on Second Reading, on Report or on Third Reading. However, interestingly, when we were debating an amendment on unaccompanied minors that had been tabled to grab the headlines, the Opposition Benches were packed. As soon as the amendment had passed, the Chamber emptied again. In fact, only one Opposition Member spoke on that Bill, which covered issues such as advisers for care leavers and adoption. Did the Opposition feel that those key issues in that massive piece of legislation would not quite grab the headlines? I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) that tonight's debate seems to be about political point scoring and the Opposition trying to grab headlines when they think it will matter.

We have two years ahead of us in which, as the Government make progress, to debate the biggest piece of legislation that this Parliament has seen for many years. It covers something that my constituents are extremely concerned about. They are concerned that we should debate the issues properly and that we get the right legislation through the House, so it is absolutely correct that that must be the focus on both sides of the House. We must have enough time to debate that issue—

Chris Bryant: What is it?

Kelly Tolhurst: It is the issue of Brexit: the laws that will come through and the intricacies of what will happen when we leave the European Union.

Really, I think the Opposition should get over themselves a bit. As many of my hon. Friends have pointed out, 20 Opposition day debates have been put aside, which will give Labour 17 to take part in. I look forward to joining in those debates when they occur—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who

is sitting at the back there, has spent the whole debate being quite rude, not only to the Leader of the House but to me. What a shame—

Mr Kevan Jones: May I give the hon. Lady some advice? If she is going to make a speech, will she please look at the subject before she stands up to speak? She said she was disappointed that this debate was limiting the time available for the next one, a point made by the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies). If she had not given in to the Whips and agreed to speak in this debate, would we not have had more time for the next one?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention—

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kelly Tolhurst: I will.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought my hon. Friend might like to remind the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) about an hour-long speech he once gave in an attempt to filibuster a Finance Bill debate. Motes and beams come to mind.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, but I would like to go back to the hon. Member for North Durham's point. I am fully aware of what this debate is about. That is exactly why I wanted to highlight the poor performance of the Opposition in the debates on the Children and Social Work Bill. We had three debates on a subject that I and many of my constituents—including the young, looked-after children—care about, and it was really depressing when I had to go back to those children and say, "I'm very sorry, but the Labour party, which says it represents you, was not speaking up for you in the Chamber. It was the Conservatives who did that." So I will make that point!

Anyway, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall carry on. I am looking forward to the next two years here, in which we will do what the British people want. They want us to make sure that we deliver on Brexit. I suggest that Labour Members get over themselves and recognise that they have many opportunities to debate and to contribute in the House. They should just get on with it, and work with us to deliver what the British people want.

7.38 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who made an absolutely sterling, brilliant Union speech. I concurred with nearly everything she said in it, apart from the political stuff—[*Interruption.*] Well, the party political stuff. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova)—who is not in her place at the moment—also made an exemplary speech. It is nice to hear a Member paying tribute to their mother in the Chamber, and my hon. Friend did that beautifully and elegantly.

It is a shame that I am following the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), because I am actually rather fond of her, having spent a great deal of time in her constituency contributing to the Labour party coming third in the by-election. She said that Labour Members needed to get over themselves and get

on with it. Yes, we would like to get on with the business of opposition; the problem is that we are not being given the Opposition days on which to be the honourable Opposition. That is the whole point. I apologise to the Leader of the House; I was rude to her earlier. I actually like her, and there are some things that I want out of her, so I am going to be nice to her now. Seriously, I was rude earlier, but I feel strongly about such issues.

The Government and Government Members need to bear it in mind that the power of the Executive in our parliamentary system is quite phenomenal. Standing Order No. 14 says that the Government have complete control over the timetable. They get to decide when they are going to give days to the Opposition, to private Members' Bills and to the rest, but Government business always takes precedence. Standing Order No. 48 says that only the Government can table motions relating to money and taxation. We do not have a proper Budget; we have a Budget speech. This House does not actually decide on the process of how money is allocated at all. Standing Order No. 83A means that only the Government can table a programme motion, so only the Government can decide how much time we are going to devote to each element. Even in the utter nitty-gritty of the Welsh Grand Committee, only the Government can table a motion under Standing Order No. 108 to say when we are going to have a Welsh Grand Committee, what it will debate and all the rest of it.

Kevin Brennan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is also speaking through a hole in his head. It is just a biological fact, and I hope he does not think I am being rude.

My hon. Friend is describing a fundamental principle of this place, and that is actually what this debate is about—it is not a debate about debates. The principle is that the Government have their way, but the Opposition have their say. By denying us Opposition days while having their way about extending the Session to two years, the Government are breaching that fundamental principle of Parliament.

Chris Bryant: Yes, we have had several Sessions that lasted only several months because of early general elections or because, in the old days, the parliamentary Session started in November and then ended in the spring. We did not suddenly have 17 Opposition days because that is the fixed number of such days in a Session. Since Richard Crossman introduced these in November 1967, the whole idea of the change from Supply day debates to Opposition day debates was that the Opposition would have a fair amount of guaranteed time during the year.

This is not just about the Standing Orders; the Government have the absolute power to decide on the date of the Prorogation and how long a Session will be. That is only in the hands of the Government, not in our hands or the House's hands. The Government get to decide when we will adjourn and go into recess. Only Government amendments are guaranteed to be considered on Report, and only the Government can table an amendment to the Standing Orders and be certain that it will be debated. That is a phenomenal tying up of power in the hands of the Executive, and the only thing that the Opposition have in return is the expectation that the Leader of the House and the Government will exercise fair play.

Pete Wishart: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for totally forgetting his constituency during my contribution. How could I forget that he is the hon. Member for Rhondda? May I suggest a solution that he may like to think about and put to the Leader of the House? If there is going to be an issue with Opposition days, one way around this is through unallotted days, which were used in 2015 to 2017. I am sure that he will remember that they were also used in 2001. What is the reason for not giving unallotted days? The Government could just say how many of them they were going to give.

Chris Bryant: They could do that. In the 2010 to 2012 Session, the problem was that we did not know that it was going to be a two-year Session until the Session moved along. The Government kept on refusing to announce whether there would be a Prorogation or a two-year Session, so it is not an exact match with what we have now. The Government have already said that this will be a two-year Session, so they should be able to say that there will be a proportionate number of Opposition days and days for private Members' Bills and Back-bench business. Any ordinary member of the public would say that that is what everybody would genuinely expect.

The hon. Members for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) said that all this stuff does not really matter and that it is not about democracy. I would ask them just to remember that the big row in this House in 1939 was about whether the House should adjourn in August when there was a fear of war with Germany. That was the row. It was not about some grand piece of legislation; it was about whether the House should adjourn. Ronald Cartland—the younger brother of Barbara Cartland—who was killed while serving bravely in the second world war and who has a shield on the wall of the Chamber, accused Chamberlain of having “ideas of dictatorship” because Chamberlain was using the undoubted power that Government had to decide when the Adjournment was and he thought that that was wrong, especially in a House that was largely composed of Conservative Members.

Another problem is that the recent move towards lots and lots of secondary legislation might be okay if what the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has regularly said in the House were true—namely, that if a piece of secondary legislation is prayed against, it will always come to the House—but it is not. Between 2010 and 2016, 69 pieces of secondary legislation—statutory instruments—tabled by the Government were prayed against by the Opposition. According to the “David Davis” rule, it should have been guaranteed that they would be debated on the Floor of the House, but how many of the 69 were debated in the House? Three. Eight were debated in Committee, but the debates in Committee were not about whether they were good statutory instruments; they were on whether the matter had been considered. Even if every single member of the Statutory Instrument Committee had voted no, the measure would still have gone on the statute book.

When the Government come forward with something called the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which wants to give massive amounts of secondary legislative power to the Government, the Opposition are very sceptical. That is when it starts to look like, in the words of Ronald Cartland, “ideas of dictatorship”, not because any of the individual members of the Government think

[*Chris Bryant*]

of themselves as dictators, but because the power that this House has, over the years, given to Government over every element of the agenda is so important.

Several people have already made the point that we should have had an Opposition day by now. I say to the hon. Member for Eastleigh that there is a vital difference between a hot-air debate that ends with a vote on whether we are going to adjourn, as we had at the end of the WASPI debate, and a substantive motion on the Order Paper that has effect, either because it is legislation or because it is an Opposition day debate. When Labour were in government and had a majority, we lost an Opposition day debate on the Gurkhas and that changed what happened—several of us here have scars from that debate. In the end, the Government cannot always run away from those kind of debates. I say to Conservative Members that there has to come a point when the whole House has to consider the long-term future of how we do our business, not just the partisan advantage of today.

Mims Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: If the hon. Lady does not mind, I will not because I want to—

Mims Davies: You are talking about me.

Kevin Brennan: She has a very good point.

Chris Bryant: As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) says, the hon. Lady has a very good point, so I will give way.

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman is very kind. As a former shadow Leader of the House—I enjoyed his speeches when he was sitting where the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) is—will his constituents in Rhondda really think that the time that this House is spending debating parliamentary business is what we should be doing in the last week before the recess? I said in my speech that jobs, opportunities and schools are what really matter.

Chris Bryant: Of course, there are lots and lots of things that we should debate. I would like a debate in Government or Opposition time—I do not mind—with a votable motion on the WASPI campaign. I know exactly how I am going to vote, and I hope that I will be able to persuade the hon. Lady to join us in the Lobby. We can have as many warm-words debates as we want, but if there is no vote at the end, our constituents will feel fundamentally let down. I say to Conservative Members that they would be better off having that debate sooner rather than later; otherwise, they will have an awful lot of upset people.

If the Government had a programme, I would be happy for us to debate that programme, but there is no legislation. The Leader of the House referred to the Air Travel Organisers' Licensing Bill, but that is not a Bill—it is barely a clause in a Bill. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said earlier, we had to debate it on the Floor of the House because the Government have not set up the Committee of Selection so that we can have a proper Committee to debate the thing.

I do not doubt that the Government have the power to do these things, but I no longer think they have the authority to do them. Every day they abuse that power, they diminish their own authority; and every day they stretch the gap between their power and their authority, they abandon government by consent and lapse into ideas of dictatorship. That is why the Government are wrong.

7.49 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): In some ways I feel that Christmas has come early, because here we are with three hours to debate parliamentary procedure, one of my favourite activities. Indeed, I look forward to aestivating in Somerset and talking with my family about all the intricacies of Standing Orders, so I feel in many ways fortunate.

It has been a particularly happy and fortunate debate, with two brilliant maiden speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), whose constituency I have had the privilege of visiting—I know its manifold beauties—put the case for the Union perfectly. She should be hired by her tourist board to encourage further visits to her wonderful constituency.

The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) was so generous to her predecessor. It is one of the great charms of maiden speeches that we recognise in them, if only briefly and for the only time in our political careers, that people on the other side of the House are actually not all bad. It is very charming that that is done, and she did it particularly well.

Standing Order No. 14(2) is an important subject, and I have much sympathy with what the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said in his well-considered speech. It is the job of those of us on the Back Benches to hold the Government to account, but the job of holding the Executive to account is not just one for the Opposition; it is one for Government Back Benchers, too. Our constitution works if it is balanced and if the Government have to make their case and their arguments, but this debate misfires because the Opposition have come to it too soon in the Parliament and have given it an urgency that it does not deserve.

In my earlier intervention I questioned whether it was wise to have asked for this debate, not whether it was wise to grant the debate. Standing Order No. 24 is an exceptionally valuable tool, and I am glad you are back in the Chair, Mr Speaker, because the more that Standing Order is used, the better.

Kevin Brennan: That is not what the hon. Gentleman said earlier, as *Hansard* will show. Standing Order No. 24, as he well knows, puts the onus completely in the hands of the Speaker to decide whether something is an urgent matter for debate, and the motion does not proceed if the Speaker does not believe it is urgent.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I questioned the wisdom of requesting the debate, not of granting it, which is a very important distinction. It is of the greatest importance that the Speaker, if asked for an emergency debate by the formal Opposition, should in almost all circumstances grant it because such debates are an important way of holding the Government to account and of inconveniencing the Government.

As the hon. Member for Rhondda said, Standing Order No. 14 gives enormous power to the Government to set out the business of this House, but the Opposition need opportunities to raise urgent matters. There, the Opposition must be wise in what they ask for.

Kevin Brennan: Given the hon. Gentleman has put on the record that he believes the Speaker should, in almost all circumstances, grant a Standing Order No. 24 request from the Opposition, I look forward to his supporting future applications that the Opposition will have to make because of the lack of time for Opposition day debates.

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is where I think the Opposition have misfired today:

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.”

But this is not the season or the time. So much is happening of general urgency, and this debate strikes me as fiddling while Brussels burns. We have the massive Brexit debate to consider, we still have a huge deficit to be debated and we have a great housing crisis that has been so starkly brought to our attention by what happened at Grenfell Tower, and what do Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition ask for? They ask for a debate on Standing Orders—a debate on a debate. A debate on conversation. Even for one who loves procedure and thinks it of great importance, can that be what is of most urgency to us today? It is a question of proportionality.

The hon. Member for Rhondda made many important points about how the House has limited powers to hold a strong Government to account and about how it should use those powers, but the Opposition have asked for this debate a few days into the Session, before we have had any real opportunity to discover how many Opposition days we will have, and well before it is decided whether additional days will be given because it is a two-year Session. I have no doubt that further days will be given. Indeed, if all 20 days have been used up a year from now and the Government come to the Dispatch Box to say that there will be no more days, I will be on the side of the Opposition. I would support the Opposition in asking for a proportional share during the second year of this Session, which would be only right. I would also be in favour of an extra three days for the Scottish National party, because that is what this Parliament ought to do, but the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), the shadow Leader of the House, has misfired—this is too soon and too early, and it is not genuinely urgent.

Pete Wishart: I sort of accept the hon. Gentleman’s point. Maybe it is a bit too early, but he knows the history of previous Parliaments and of how Opposition days were granted after the Select Committees and Standing Committees were up and running. It is unusual for those Committees not to be up and running after four weeks. Surely he must have some concerns about that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Again, I think the hon. Gentleman is premature. The issue is the month lost between May and June. We have the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, and we have gotten used to having elections in May. We therefore expect these things to be up and running in time for the summer recess, which I absolutely accept, but he misses the point that the election was under not

the normal procedure but the extraordinary procedure of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. We therefore assembled a month later, closer to the summer recess. The process of electing Select Committee Chairmen and Select Committee members takes a little time, and the Opposition are simply being unreasonable. If we were having this debate in September, they would have a fair point; and if we were having it in October, they would have an outrageous point if they did not have any Opposition day debates by then.

This Session has hardly begun. It is in its infancy. It is like Sixtus, my newborn son. It is still in the mewling and puking stage. It has not reached the stage of toddling, walking and taking bold steps.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that, when raising a child, one must try to instruct that child in good behaviour from the very beginning and not let it misbehave early on? Therefore, surely our role is to ensure that the Government do not misbehave early on.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is a harsher authoritarian than I am. The strict disciplining of a child not yet a fortnight old would be unreasonable by any standards. All I can say is that I am glad not to be an infant in his household.

This debate is too early, and the problem with it being too early is that it comes when things of real gravity are happening. We are in as uncertain a time as I can recall. There is so much of gravity with which we need to grapple. I have said that I think and hope that you would grant any reasonable request by the Opposition for a Standing Order No. 24 debate, Mr Speaker, and there are so many debates for which they could have asked. In her opening speech, the hon. Member for Walsall South listed about a dozen things that could have been debated. If any of them had been requested under Standing Order No. 24, we could have had a sensible debate that added distinction and lustre to this Parliament. But standing here—I am as guilty of it as anyone else, but I have admitted that I am a procedural bore—and discussing the intricacies of procedure when so much is going on is not in tune with the nation and is not serious opposition; it is opportunism. If they can, the Opposition should withdraw the motion.

7.59 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am delighted to be able to speak in this important debate. I thank you for granting it, Mr Speaker, and my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for securing it. I wish to follow everyone else in congratulating the new Members, the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), on making superb, notable maiden speeches.

I want to confine my remarks to the procedural debate and the arguments we are putting forward, which I believe are solid and sound. Let me start by pointing out that the result of the general election has changed the role of this Chamber; power has shifted from the Executive to Parliament. There have been few times when we, as Back-Bench MPs, have had a greater ability to influence and shape Government policy. It is all very well Members suggesting that this is a needless debate, but I do not think that is true; people can stretch the

[*Grahame Morris*]

truth thin enough, but when they do that others can see through it. It is true that a lack of time has been allocated to Back-Bench business, private Members' Bills and Opposition day debates, and people can see that that is an attempt to stifle the role and influence of this Chamber. I sincerely hope that Back Benchers, of all parties, can also see that.

At the Prime Minister's recent relaunch, she reached out to the Labour party, asking us to "contribute and not just criticise".

That is a worthy sentiment. Although I may disagree fundamentally with the right wing of the Conservative party, the Prime Minister's plea to Labour was an attempt to stifle the Back-Bench voice in this Chamber. I am willing to work with parliamentary colleagues, but I would never vote to cut workers' rights or to privatisate even more of our public sector services. I accept that I will be unable to convert many in the Conservative party—perhaps not any—to the benefits of re-nationalising our railways, abolishing university tuition fees, or increasing spending on social care or on other public services, although there are many sound arguments for doing such. However, there are areas of consensus, and issues that can bridge politics.

I had hoped the public sector pay cap would be such an issue. I had hoped that some Conservative Members would be outraged by the Chancellor's alleged comments, which were widely reported, about public sector workers—the idea that nurses, teachers, firefighters, police officers and prison staff were "overpaid" and receiving a "premium". I would like him to tell that to the student nurse who contacted me over the weekend as she faced the prospect of sleeping in a colleague's car, because there were no trains after her night shift and she only had £10 to last the week. I hope eventually we will see the lifting of the pay cap. If it does not come from Conservative Members, perhaps their colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party can exert their influence and give public sector workers the pay rise they deserve.

I will look beyond the Prime Minister's offer to "contribute", as there is little prospect of her ever listening to a lowly Back Bencher, particularly a socialist, trade union supporting Labour MP like me. So perhaps there is more prospect of reaching out to other Back Benchers, not just to criticise, but to contribute. Other right hon. and hon. Members have made reference to the Westminster Hall debate on 5 July about the women's state pension age and the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. It was extraordinarily well attended—the Chamber was packed. It was dominated by Opposition Members from the Labour party, the Scottish National party and other nationalists, but a sizeable number of Conservative Members were there, too. There were excellent contributions by Members from every party, who recognised that a clear injustice had occurred and that the Government should take steps to put things right. The Government's response ranged from indifference to ridiculousness.

I ask Conservative Members to look at the comments from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who was here just a few minutes ago. He is not a bad individual and I get on with him incredibly well, but it is outrageous to suggest that women who have been forced

to wait longer for their state pension should be offered apprenticeships. For the Members who were not there, I can tell them that I have never heard anything like what I heard from the public gallery; there were gasps and cries of "Shame!" when the Minister made that outrageous suggestion. He did a disservice to the women affected, the Conservative party and the Government.

Although I do not have a great deal of interest in the reputation and popularity of the Conservative party, I expect many Members sitting opposite do. I certainly know that, privately anyway, many may disagree with the Government's position on the WASPI women and strongly believe action should be taken to right this wrong. As Back Benchers, we have not only a voice in this Parliament, but the ability to shape policy and, in this case, improve the lives of millions of our constituents. I know we do not want to have a re-hash of the debate, but I am trying to deal with the point that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) made about how we could be addressing important issues, as this is a crucial issue.

With all due respect to the Leader of the House and the Government, who determine the business, in this Session we seem to get involved in a lot of displacement activity; we are debating the same things over and over again, without a vote on the motion. If we do not have a resolution, we simply cannot move forward. We need to demand of the Government—this needs to come not only from the Opposition, but from Back Benchers—that they do something. I can assure Members that if we have consensus, or we are dealing with sensible policies or sensible Bills from Members from any party, I will give such matters my full consideration, and I hope others would do the same.

I ask Conservative Members to recognise that they have the power to demand change for the WASPI women. If the Government will not budge, we will have to demand and obtain a meaningful vote on the Floor of the House. I know the extent of the changes we can achieve will be determined by those willing to break the Conservative Whip, but Back-Bench MPs had only a small voice in the last Parliament. Now the arithmetic has changed and, in this Parliament, we have the power if we choose to exercise it. WASPI is one campaign where I know we have the numbers, and other hon. Members may be able to identify other issues or concerns; I have a whole bagful in relation to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, the Homes and Communities Agency and so on. If we have a basis for consensus, we can achieve policy changes. If, as I suspect, we have a legislature that does not wish to legislate, I urge and implore all Members to make this Parliament the Back-Bench Parliament.

8.8 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. I love process and procedure, and I do not think it is to be derided or criticised. Process and procedure is why we settle big debates in this place and not out there on the streets, so there are no apologies from me.

I am delighted that we have such experts in this place on process and procedure. I know very little about it, but my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is an expert, as are you, Mr Speaker, in the Chair today. I do not want to sound like a crashing

bore in what is my maiden speech in my fourth Parliament—four Parliaments is quite impressive; we are moving in the right direction. But I would just say that the genuine maiden speech—

Mr Rees-Mogg: “Erskine May” makes it clear that someone’s maiden speech is their maiden speech only in their first Parliament, so they are allowed to be interrupted in subsequent Parliaments.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes that point brilliantly in the way that only he can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) made a fantastic speech, a Unionist speech, and touched on a part of the world I love greatly, Scotland. It is a beautiful country and my hon. Friend will be a fantastic representative for her constituency.

Although she is not in her place, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) made a fabulous speech about a part of the world I hold very dear. I was, after all, a councillor in Battersea, in the borough of Wandsworth, for many years—well, actually, for four years, but it seemed longer. I was a councillor for the most famous and celebrated ward of Battersea, Balham. If you are going to be a councillor anywhere in the country, why not Balham?

In concluding my brief remarks, let me say that it is always best for Governments of whatever colour to be generous and magnanimous. As you will know, Mr Speaker, in this place generosity is often abused but never despised. My plea to Government as we go forward is for them please to be generous in their approach to the Opposition Benches. They will be on the side of the angels if they are.

8.11 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) and my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for their maiden speeches. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend, who, as I was, was one of the unexpected winners that brought my party some steps closer to being the party of government.

With the greatest of respect to right hon. and hon. colleagues, I have sometimes been a bit disappointed by my experiences as a new Member of Parliament. The first disappointment I commented on was the lack of answers to questions and our inability to hear either during Prime Minister’s questions. Indeed, a tweet I made on the subject was viewed more than half a million times and retweeted 10,000 times by the public, who no doubt share that concern. The fact that I have to take part in this debate today as a new Member without the ability to do anything substantive as an Opposition Member until, allegedly, October, is adding to my disappointment.

I, like many others, have looked towards politics since childhood as the route to achieving change in this country. I, like many other Members, have worked hard for years, election after election, to be elected to this House to try to achieve that change. Like in the children’s novel, “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz”, I always assumed that if I made it to the end of the yellow brick road to this place I might find the wonderful wizard of government. Instead, much like Dorothy and her obviously disappointed dog, Toto, I have failed to find a Government of mandates,

leadership or stature and instead, behind the curtain, I have found a group of middle-aged men protecting their egos in a bid to take over from a lame duck Prime Minister.

Andrea Leadsom: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I challenge the hon. Gentleman on whether he just called me a middle-aged man?

Mr Speaker: I hope he did not; that would be a serious error. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is not accusing the Leader of the House of being a middle-aged man, and if he could confirm that, honour will be served.

Darren Jones: Of course I would not class the Leader of the House in that group of middle-aged men—but I am sure that she knows each and every one of them as they vie for the leadership of her party and, perhaps, try to take her position.

When Britain faces arguably her most challenging time since the second world war, with decisions taken here in this Parliament deciding what type of country Britain will be for the next generation, it seems to me that the Government need to step up to allow for accountability and opposition. As my hon. colleagues have said, this debate is about the lack of time being given to us, with Opposition day and Back-Bench business debates seemingly in short supply on the basis of simple parliamentary mathematics.

Many Government Members who campaigned to take back control and argued for parliamentary sovereignty for this place will no doubt share my concern. A. V. Dicey, the father of parliamentary constitutional theory, would be turning in his grave; the theories on which he built from Montesquieu on the separation of powers and the *trias politica*, which mean that power should be balanced between the Executive and the legislature, are not being followed because the Opposition are not being allowed to hold the Government to account. The balance is not as it should be. The taking back of control to this Parliament, as opposed to the Executive, is failing. With a Government entirely consumed by their chaotic management of Brexit, seemingly more interested in self-preservation than the national interest, it must be left to the Opposition to act as a party of government with a mandate for government in our manifesto to ensure proper debate on the issues about which my constituents are concerned.

Dare I say that it is no longer acceptable for Ministers to stand up and say, “Everything will be fine; we are a great nation”? Blind patriotism detached from the real world will only show us as a country out of touch and out of control. That is why we must be allowed proper time for debate in this House, to help the Government understand the reality of their inaction. My frustration at the news yesterday was a prime example, as Ministers decided to waste their time by briefing against each other instead of getting on with the job in hand. That frustration might have been calmed by the knowledge that I would have the opportunity to debate the issues of the day in a grown-up, professional and respectful fashion in this House, in the way my constituents expect of us and for the reasons they elected me to this House in the first place. But it seems that that most normal of asks is being thwarted by the Government, so it is with

[*Darren Jones*]

great disappointment that I find myself having to make this speech in support of the motion from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), arguing for what should be normal debate in this Parliament.

Although you might not be able to resolve my disappointment, Mr Speaker, at what I found behind the curtain of power, I hope that this House will put the national interest above power games and party political concerns and allow proper time for debate and scrutiny.

8.17 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones). I, like other hon. Members, am a bit disappointed that the debate has eaten into time that we might otherwise have used for the debate on abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public during the general election campaign, particularly as at the weekend, when I was trying to enjoy some quiet time with my family, a member of the public went to the considerable extent of getting my private number to phone me up and tell me that she disliked me and what I stood for so much that she was not surprised I got death threats. That was a charming start to the weekend with my family. But this is also an important debate, and it is important that we consider the scheduling—or rather, the lack of scheduling—of parliamentary business before the recess.

We have heard two excellent maiden speeches. The hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) made an accomplished speech and I thank her for the gracious comments she made about our friend and colleague, Mike Weir, our previous Chief Whip. I respect her Unionist views and I hope that she will respect my wishes for my country to become independent in due course. She is very keen for the SNP to take independence off the table according to what she says were the wishes of her constituents in 2014, but I remind her that last year her constituents voted by a significant majority to remain part of the European Union. She might also like to ask the Government to take Brexit off the table if she is so keen on her constituents' wishes.

We also had a fantastic maiden speech from the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). She is not in her place, but I found it a fascinating history of her admirably diverse constituency and a very moving tribute to her mother in assisting her in the battle with her disability. I am sure that she will be a fantastic advocate in this House for those of our constituents who have to deal with disability in their lives.

As hon. Members have said, there can be no doubt that this Government seem to be running scared of scrutiny. The very reason we had an unnecessary general election four or five weeks ago was that the Prime Minister wanted to avoid scrutiny by getting herself such an enormous majority that this House would not scrutinise her effectively, but she did not get her wishes, and now we have a hung Parliament in which there is the possibility of true scrutiny. But she need not despair; she need only look north to Holyrood for an example of a minority Government who have managed to bring forward a full legislative programme in their first year that includes groundbreaking legislation on child poverty, and the Social Security (Scotland) Bill, which will put fairness,

dignity and respect at the heart of Scotland's social security system; that is not what happens in the system under which the rest of the UK labours.

It seems that the Prime Minister is running rather short of ideas. Those of us in Scotland who fought Tory candidates in the general election, as I did—successfully, I am glad to say—will be aware that the Tories in Scotland had only one policy. People are beginning to wonder what the Tory party stands for. What is it here to do? What do the Government exist to do, other than take Britain out of the European Union in the most inane and hapless fashion possible?

What will the new Scottish Conservative Members of Parliament do in this Parliament to scrutinise the Government? What will they do with their time here? Clearly the Prime Minister's estimation of their abilities is such that she has had to enoble one of their colleagues who was defeated by my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and shoved him into the House of Lords to be a Minister, because she does not think that the Tory MPs are up to it. I wonder if she is right, as they have shown a remarkable ignorance, since they got here, of the difference between devolved and reserved powers—rather like the drafters of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, it seems. I would like to make a generous offer: I would be happy to recommend an undergraduate law student from my alma mater to give the Conservatives a little tutorial on the difference between reserved and devolved powers, so that they can cope with this Parliament.

Pete Wishart: As the Scottish Conservatives are 13 in number, it is quite possible that they could inflict a Government defeat, if they chose to. They said that they would work for Scotland's interests; does my hon. and learned Friend remember exactly what they did in response to the appalling deal between the Government and the Democratic Unionist party that was put forward?

Joanna Cherry: I do, and as somebody who is LGBT, I find the deal with the DUP particularly obnoxious, but it is not just my rights that I am bothered about; it is everyone's human rights, including women's reproductive rights and human rights generally. [*Interruption.*] An hon. Gentleman shouts at me to give over, but human rights are important to some of us in this House. I am happy to tell him that I will not give over on human rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire asked what the Conservative Tory MPs would do to represent the interests of voters in Scotland. We are promised an immigration Bill sometime this Parliament. There is no sign of it yet. One thing that Conservative MPs could do is respect the wishes of business in Scotland. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors have said—

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it right and appropriate that while my hon. and learned Friend makes a speech, Tory heavies stand at the Bar of the House and heckle and chunter away, though they are not part of this debate?

Mr Speaker: I had not heard the alleged chuntering. Hon. Members certainly should not chunter; it is unseemly behaviour. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) is a robust individual and

is well able to fend for herself, but they should not stand in an aggressive, Mafioso posture. It is rather disagreeable and quite unnecessary.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope this is a point of order rather than a point of advertisement.

Mark Pritchard: Not to correct the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), but may I confess that it was not the Whips chuntering? It was my good self, Sir.

Mr Speaker: That is both candid of the hon. Gentleman and, arguably, a first.

Joanna Cherry: My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire, some hon. Gentlemen and, of course, the Speaker, are gallant, but I can assure them that I have no difficulty with the chuntering going on to my left. It certainly will not put me off my stride.

I was suggesting that the Government need to bring forward a debate on the Floor of the House on the basis for their immigration policy. We heard during the general election campaign that the Prime Minister wants to stick with the unrealistic targets that she has missed for seven years. The reason why the targets are unrealistic is that they are based on ideology, not evidence. We need an evidence-based debate on the Floor of the House about immigration policy for the whole of the UK. If we have that, we will see that immigrants are on average more likely to be in work, better educated and younger than the indigenous population, and that Scotland's demographic needs are such that we require a progressive immigration policy. As I said earlier, business in Scotland wants this; the Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors in Scotland have said that they want the post-student work visa brought back, and a different immigration policy for Scotland, given its unique democratic needs. Let us have a debate about that, rather than about process.

Countries such as Canada and Australia manage to operate differential immigration procedures within their federation. Professor Christina Boswell of the University of Edinburgh has produced an excellent report evaluating the options for a differentiated approach to immigration policy in Scotland. There is cross-party support in Scotland for the post-study work visa; even the Scottish Tory party supports its return, so what will the Tory MPs do about that, and when will we have a debate about it on the Floor of the House?

Another important issue from the last Parliament is the plight of child refugees in Europe. Many of us, including Conservative Members, fought for their rights, and we got the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Act 2016. Last week, I attended the launch of a report by the Human Trafficking Foundation that followed an independent inquiry on separated and unaccompanied minors in Europe. It reveals that the UK Government have woefully failed those children, and that Ministers have done

“as little as legally possible”

to help unaccompanied children in Europe. It says that the Government have turned from a humanitarian crisis that “would not be tolerable” to the British public if they could see the truth of what was happening in France. When will we be able to hold the Government to account for the promises that they made when the Dubs amendment was agreed to, and for bringing only 480 minors to the United Kingdom when the understanding was that they would bring in 3,000? When will we have a debate about that important issue? We must find time in this Parliament to force the Government to rectify their dereliction of the duty that we imposed on them when we agreed the Dubs amendment.

Finally, on the connected issue of human rights, hon. Members have mentioned the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that was brought forward last week. Clause 5 makes it clear that the Government do not intend the EU charter of fundamental rights to become part of what they call domestic law after Brexit. This must be challenged and debated immediately. There was a time not so long ago when the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was a great fan of the charter. He liked it so much that he used it to take up a legal challenge against the “snooper’s charter”, which ended up in the European Court of Justice, but he has changed his mind, and he has brought forward a draft Bill under which a whole swathe of rights and protections enjoyed by our constituents will go, if the Bill is passed unamended. Where is the debate about that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The charter of fundamental rights only applies to citizens of the United Kingdom insofar as it applies to EU law. It therefore cannot have applicability once we have left the European Union because we will no longer be subject to EU law.

Joanna Cherry: Yes. But if, as the Government have promised, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is going to guarantee all the rights that we already enjoy by virtue of our EU citizenship, the charter of fundamental rights should not be going. The charter defends all sorts of rights, such as data protection, children’s rights and the freestanding right to equality, which are not protected by the European convention on human rights.

Lucy Frazer: Would those rights not be protected when incorporated into our laws as British laws, notwithstanding that their source was the EU?

Joanna Cherry: The hon. and learned Lady is ably illustrating why we need a debate about this. Despite the fact that the EU charter of fundamental rights will not be part of domestic law, she thinks that those rights will, nevertheless, still be protected. Let us have a debate about how we are going to do that. That is my point. On the face of the Bill, it looks like these rights will be lost.

These rights are real. Just last week in the Supreme Court, a gentleman called John Walker was able to ensure equal pension rights for his husband thanks to EU law. That was a timely reminder of the value of EU law to our constituents. Those are important rights. What is more important than a married couple of two men or two women having the same pension rights as a straight couple? I personally find that very important, as I am sure do many other Members.

[*Joanna Cherry*]

We cannot afford to fall behind the standard set by the European Union on human rights. But, on the face of it, the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill seems to be about to do that. We must insist on parliamentary time to debate these issues properly. I call on the Government to get their act together, have the courage of their convictions and bring the business to the Floor of the House. We can then debate some of the issues that I, and other hon. Members, have mentioned in a full and frank fashion. The Government should do that, rather than running scared from the policies that they were so keen to espouse when they thought they were going to have a whopping majority. They are not so keen now.

8.31 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the maiden speeches of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair).

If we get time today, we may get to a debate on the Youth Parliament. I am probably one of the only Members of the Youth Parliament when it was set up in 2000 and 2001 who has now become a Member of Parliament. I reflect on that experience compared to this one. The kind of behaviour we now see from the Government—cutting down the opportunity for debate and discussion—would have been unheard of in the Youth Parliament. This is meant to be the mother of Parliaments, but it seems perfectly acceptable to play jiggery-pokery with the timetable. I wonder about the responsibility of the Government, and what this looks like for constituents out in the wider world.

Today my constituents were queuing around the block for more than an hour, not for a gig or a music activity, but to see the local doctor in Peacehaven. That is a regular thing for my constituents. Why? Because, of course, doctors' workloads have doubled, and the resources to our NHS have reduced. Equally, we do not have enough houses. Independent research shows that teachers' pay has reduced by £3 an hour in real terms and that their workloads have increased since the Conservative party took power. [*Interruption.*] Members on the other side of the Chamber may wish to chunter about that, but I suggest they read the research.

My constituents would be flabbergasted to think that we are effectively reducing our workload by covering the same amount in two years as we would in one. I am afraid that saying, "Oh, it is all because that is what it says in the Standing Orders" is a weak response. We need to take the moral high ground, not just the letter of the Standing Orders.

Mark Pritchard: May I suggest that the facts contradict the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks? Today we are having a debate about future debates, and that is democracy, whether he likes it or not. However, does he agree that we need a strong economy to pay for a strong NHS? Is the British model or the Venezuelan model the best way to pay for a strong NHS?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: We can take from the best all around the world—from Scandinavia, Germany and so on. Germany, for example, has a strong economy and a

fairer society, unlike under this Government, where we have a bigger divide between rich and poor, and where people have not been able to access vital services.

Last week, a woman came into my surgery and said she had been on the waiting list for a council house for two years. I had to tell her that she was likely to remain on that waiting list for another three or four years, because the reality is that not enough houses have been built under this Government, under previous Governments and for a generation. Surely, we need to talk about making sure we can hold the Government to account for their policies. My constituent asked me to make sure her voice is heard in this Chamber. If I go back to her and say, "I'm terribly sorry, but we didn't quite get enough Opposition days to raise your urgent needs," she will feel as if her voice, through me, has been taken away—and she will feel like that quite rightly, because it has been taken away. A lack of debate and Opposition time takes the voice away from constituents from all constituencies across this country.

This has happened not with a vote in Parliament but just with an announcement in the papers that we will now have a two-year period rather than a one-year period. [*Interruption.*] Session. I do not think constituents will really care what you wish to call it. They will care about the fact that the Government are denying them a voice in Parliament, not about the petty name politics that some Members wish to play.

I am a relatively new Member—I have been here only a few weeks—but if I were an employee and I suddenly said, "I'm not going to do my work in a year. I'm going to take two years to do it," I would be put on capability, and I would probably not have a job. Well, I suggest that this Government are put on capability and that they should not have a job, because extending the amount of time in which to do the same amount of work in is not on in the workplace, and it should not be on in our Parliament.

What the Government could do is very simple: they could come here and pledge to do three things. They could say the same number of days per year will be offered for Opposition and Back-Bench business as there are in the Standing Orders per Session—easy-peasy. They should say that, make a pledge and make a commitment. Then we will not need to shoot our guns early; we will be able to sit down and relax.

The second thing the Government could easily do is say that there will be the same number of days in this Parliament for all these things as there were in previous Parliaments. That would be nice and easy to do. They could make that statement now, and, again, we could relax.

Finally, the Conservative party could get on with selecting its Select Committee representatives. They could get on with allowing us to scrutinise legislation. They could get on with the work. It is easy. The Labour party has managed to hold an election today. Our election shut 10 minutes ago. We will be announcing our representatives. Conservative Members could have been busy doing the same. Why have they not done that? They have been fiddling while democracy burns. Get on with it! That is what members of the public want: they want you to get on with it. That is what Opposition Members want: they want you to get on with it. The Government should agree the times, agree the days, make a statement, allow us to debate the issues that matter, and stop wasting our time by their prevarications.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the scheduling of parliamentary business by the Leader of the House and the implications of a two-year session for Standing Orders requirements.

ADJOURNMENT (NOVEMBER AND CHRISTMAS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House—

(1) at its rising on Tuesday 7 November 2017, do adjourn until Monday 13 November; and

(2) at its rising on Thursday 21 December 2017, do adjourn until Monday 8 January 2018.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Question agreed to.

Business of the House (Private Members' Bills)

8.41 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move,

That Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 20 October, 3 November, 1 December 2017, 19 January, 2 and 23 February, 16 March, 27 April, 11 May, 15 June, 6 July, 26 October and 23 November 2018.

The purpose of this motion is to provide 13 days for private Members' business, in line with what is required under Standing Order No. 14. Given that we have already announced that this will be an extended Session, we will of course expect to provide additional days in due course. In the extended parliamentary Session of 2010-12, the Government provided extra days for private Members' Bills, and these were approved at a later date. The motion we are dealing with today covers days for private Members' Bills between now and 23 November 2018. We will therefore bring forward a motion to provide additional days for private Members' Bills in due course, which will allow us to take into account the progress of business and any new recess dates that are announced in future.

This House must balance the needs of Members to proceed with private Members' business with Members' other priorities. Members value time spent in their constituencies on Fridays, and scheduling additional sitting Fridays for private Members' Bills in 2019, with no regard to what pressures might exist at that time, could cause avoidable inconvenience. This motion is a proportionate way to deal with this being a longer Session, and I encourage the House to support it.

Mr Speaker: I should notify the House that I have selected both of the amendments on the Order Paper—the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

8.43 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I beg to move amendment (a), after 'That', insert

'*, subject to the House agreeing before Thursday 13 September 2017 to a Motion providing for an additional 13 sitting Fridays for Private Members' Bills together with the necessary adjustments to Standing Order No.14,*'

I thank the Leader of the House for moving her motion. I should like to speak to the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I will not go over some of the arguments that I have made previously, but clearly, to our constituents private Members' Bills are a very important part of parliamentary business. Given what has been said previously, we do not have any confidence that the Government are actually going to provide us with the extra dates that the Leader of the House mentioned. That is why we tabled our amendment to provide for an extra 13 sitting Fridays.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am sorry to cut the hon. Lady off so early in her speech, but if she wants 13 extra days will she clarify whether she is also campaigning for another ballot to be held in a year's time? If private Members' Bills from the existing ballot were given

[*Philip Davies*]

26 days, that would double their chances of success compared with an ordinary Session. That strikes me as unfair. Her proposal would work only if there was another ballot in a year's time.

Valerie Vaz: I really would like that ballot, and at the top of the list would be a request that the hon. Gentleman did not disrupt private Members' Bills.

Private Members' Bills are an important means for Back Benchers to bring issues before Parliament. Many outside organisations and charities also wish such Bills to be debated. I am deeply concerned that it has been very difficult for members of the public to submit petitions, partly because Select Committees, especially the Petitions Committee, have not yet been organised. As I have said previously, we have already picked our Select Committee members, but the Leader of the House has said that the Committees will not be sitting or even organised until September.

That is why it is important, for the confidence of Parliament and for democracy, in the interests of all our constituents, that time be allocated to private Members' Bills in line with Standing Order No. 14. The Government's press release states that the Session is double the length of a normal parliamentary Session, so we would expect and accept an extra 13 days.

8.46 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate, but given that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) failed to answer my very simple question, it seems that we need to explore this subject a bit more deeply. Her amendment merely asks for another 13 sitting Fridays, while that tabled by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) goes a bit further and names an additional 13 Fridays. Neither of them, however, addresses the issue of whether they want an extra ballot in a year's time.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Surely the important point is that, of the 14 Bills that made it on to the statute book in the previous two parliamentary Sessions, three came from ten-minute rule Bills. There are other routes to getting private Members' Bills on the statute book.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comment, but the problem with ten-minute rule Bills is that they go to the back of the queue. The Bills that get precedence are those that come out of the ballot—they are the ones that get the best slice.

Of course, I understand why the hon. Member for Rhondda has tabled his amendment. Obviously, if I were in his shoes I would make the same argument: he wants 26 days rather than 13 because his Bill is top of the list and that would enhance his chances of getting it through. He is arguing out of natural self-interest and I do not blame him for doing so. If I had come top of the ballot—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) *rose*—

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman can tell us that he is not arguing out of self-interest.

Chris Bryant: I am arguing out of the hon. Gentleman's interest actually, because he supports my private Member's Bill.

Philip Davies: It is an ugly rumour but it also happens to be true: I do support the hon. Gentleman's private Member's Bill. It seems to me, therefore, that he does not need 26 days to get it through. This, however, might be his tactic in reserve, in case things do not go so well on the first day and he needs more days. I hope he will declare his interest when he moves his amendment.

The hon. Member for Walsall South has not given an explanation for her amendment. The House's Standing Orders are clear that there shall be 13 days for private Members' Bills in a Session—not a minimum or a maximum of 13 days, but 13 days. That is it. That is what is in the Standing Orders. If people want to meddle with those Standing Orders, they have to meddle with the whole thing. It is not acceptable to say, "We will have one ballot in this Session of Parliament, and we will have 26 days for that ballot." That does not wash.

The hon. Members for Walsall South and for Rhondda could have come along with an amendment to the effect that over this two-year period we need to have a second ballot in a year's time, with 13 extra days for that ballot. That would be a perfectly respectable position to hold, and I would have a bit more sympathy with that argument, although I am not saying that I would support it. The argument that they are making—that we should have 26 days for one private Members' Bill ballot—is completely and utterly unreasonable.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the Standing Orders, but the Leader of the House just announced that the Government may come forward with additional sitting days for private Members' Bills throughout the Session. Would he oppose those, and for what purpose would he suggest they should be used?

Philip Davies: I think the Standing Orders are perfectly adequate. There should be 13 days for private Members' Bills in a Session; that seems to me a perfectly reasonable number. I do not really see any justification for saying, in effect, that those who enter this ballot of private Members' Bills in this Session deserve a better chance of getting their Bills through than they would have done in any previous Session of Parliament.

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. If I recall correctly, there was a motion in the 2010-12 Parliament to extend the number of private Members' Bill days on the basis of the Session being extra long. I cannot recall him calling for an extra ballot when that motion was passed.

Philip Davies: Just because something happened in the past, it does not mean that it was a good thing. The example that the hon. Lady has given falls into that category. If she looks at my voting record, she will notice that an awful lot of things that happened during the coalition years were not particularly to my taste. I used to vote accordingly, as the record will confirm. Praying in aid something that happened during the coalition years is not necessarily the best way to win my support.

My point is that this is a matter of fairness. Everybody enters a ballot in each Session of Parliament knowing that there will be 13 days in that Session when private

Members' Bills can proceed. We are being asked today to agree that in this particular ballot from this particular Session, MPs will have a better chance of getting their private Members' Bill through than they would have done in any previous Session.

Mr Jones: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but surely if this was a normal, year-long Session, the chances of getting a private Member's Bill through would be less even than with the 13 days. I have some sympathy with him about the idea of having another ballot, but does he really think it is fair that the number of days should be limited when the Session has been increased to more than a year?

Philip Davies: As I have said, I think there is an argument for saying that there should be 13 days for this ballot, and that in a year's time we should hold another ballot for which there would be another 13 days. That would give people 26 days within the Session. That would be a perfectly reasonable thing to request, and I would have a great deal of sympathy with that. But nobody in the Opposition appears to be making that case. Why can we not have another ballot in a year's time if we are going to have double the number of days? The hon. Member for Walsall South has not been able to answer that question. No doubt the hon. Member for Rhondda will have a crack at answering it, but I do not think that there is much of an answer.

The hon. Lady seemed to be making the point that we should be trying to replicate what would normally happen over the course of two years. What would normally happen over the course of two years is that we would have two ballots, so why has the hon. Lady not included in her amendment the extra ballot that would normally have occurred during that time? She seems to be cherry-picking the bits that she wants.

I say to the Deputy Leader of the House that he should beware such requests for supposed fairness, when they would actually introduce a very unfair system in this Session of Parliament. He should stick to his guns and say that for each private Member's Bill ballot, there should be 13 days. That is plenty of opportunity for people to try to get their legislation through. If people want another 13 days, there must be another ballot—something that nobody, as yet, seems to have called for.

8.55 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I wish I could say it was a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I am very fond of him, as he knows. He is a regular visitor at Perth races and we enjoy that. I say to him, in all candour, that he is everything that is wrong with the private Members' Bill system as it is currently constituted. His filibustering—his attempt to destroy honest attempts by Members of Parliament to bring legislation forward—is the thing that our constituents hate most about sitting Fridays. I wish at some point that he would just stop.

Philip Davies: What the hon. Gentleman ought to reflect on is that the first Bill that appears on a Friday needs just 100 people to turn up to support it. He is guilty, like many other hon. Members, of complaining that a Bill did not get passed when he could not be bothered to turn up and support it. If he bothered to turn up, some of the Bills he claims are so important would get through. Perhaps he should tell that to his constituents.

Pete Wishart: Yes, of course it is a matter of 100 Members turning up, but we have had 100 Members here and private Members' Bills have been thwarted not by the hon. Gentleman, to be fair to him, but by the Government. There is something wrong and rotten in the way we deal with private Members' Bills in this House. We waste our time coming down from Scotland to participate in these debates, only for him to drone on, sometimes for two hours, to ensure that they do not proceed.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Procedure Committee has produced dozens of reports over the years—at least two in the last couple of years—outlining sensible reforms to the private Members' Bill system, many of which reflect the eminently sensible system in the Scottish Parliament, where a Bill that has cross-party support can continue to make progress. Should not that system be adopted here?

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend is utterly right. The Procedure Committee has looked at the issue on several occasions—four that I can remember—and each time has made strong and sensible proposals, suggestions and recommendations on how we should address it.

The time is right, given that we have the two-year Session. Let us vow to resolve the outstanding issues in our private Members' Bill system and ensure that we get something that is fit for purpose, something that ensures we have the respect of our constituents and something that enables us to work across the parties. I would love to work with the hon. Member for Shipley on horse-racing issues or on another interest that he and I share, but we cannot do that because he would probably filibuster a Bill so that I could not get it through. I am most surprised that he is a sponsor of the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Perhaps that suggests a change in attitude and approach—a mellowing over the years. He might actually be constructively engaged in some of these issues. [Interruption.] I hear, “Don't hold your breath,” from one of his colleagues and I will not do so.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): While the hon. Gentleman is making accusations about my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), it may help to point out that my hon. Friend spoke for over an hour on my private Member's Bill and made some very constructive points, even though he opposed it. He did not just oppose it for opposition's sake.

Pete Wishart: I am actually a great fan of the speeches by the hon. Member for Shipley. He has a unique talent for filibustering. I just wish he would not do it on private Members' Bill days, when we are trying to get things through the House. He seems to be able to speak for hours and hours on these things. It is something that new Members of the House might have to look at to see how to do it.

We will support the amendments put forward by the hon. Member for Rhondda and the Labour Front Bench. We fundamentally and profoundly agree that we must have a routine for private Members' Bills that respects the fact that this is a two-year Session of Parliament. To have 13 days for private Members' Bills is clearly insufficient. I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Shipley that the Rolls-Royce solution is to have another ballot

[*Pete Wishart*]

next year. That is something that the Government will not do, so what should we do in the face of the Government's refusal to do that? Surely the sensible approach is to ensure sufficient time for the private Members' Bills that we already have, which would possibly allow more to progress through this House than we would normally expect.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said that it would be the Rolls-Royce solution to have a second ballot—my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made a perfectly good point about that—but nobody has asked for that and it is not in the amendment.

Pete Wishart: How about the hon. Lady and I campaign to ensure that we get that in place? If she agrees with me—some of her hon. Friends look like they might also agree with her—let us do it, because that is surely the solution we need. Now, we will not get that—the Government have made it clear that it will not happen—so what we need is an arrangement for the existing private Members' Bills that properly reflects the two-year Session.

We have a long affection for private Members' Bills on these Benches. We had the first SNP private Member's Bill last year, when Eilidh Whiteford, the former Member for Banff and Buchan, got her private Member's Bill on the Istanbul convention through the House—it was probably opposed by some Conservative Members. Last year we had four private Members' Bills in the top 10—there were some fantastic ones proposed—but we were really pleased for our former colleague Eilidh Whiteford and proud that she managed to get hers through the House last year. We also have two this time round, and I look forward to the fantastic private Members' Bills to be proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald)—they are no longer in their places. I look forward to hearing them support their Bills in the House.

We need certainty about private Members' Bills, because while it is quite easy for some colleagues on the other side of the Chamber to get back and forth to the House of Commons on Fridays, it is not so easy for Members from Scotland. Getting down to the House of Commons to take part in these debates involves getting on a plane which takes probably in the region of four to seven hours. We therefore need certainty about when sitting Fridays will be, and we are grateful to the Leader of the House, who has listed the seven sittings we will secure over the next year.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare an interest as the person who came fifth in the private Members' Bill ballot—the highest on this side of the House. By the hon. Gentleman's logic, he is arguing for more sitting Fridays, when it would be even harder for people from Scotland to come down here, and nowhere in his argument does he acknowledge the fact that the most important stage of a Bill's progress is Committee, which can go on for weeks and weeks and is not subject to any of the criticisms of what may happen on a Friday. Surely that is an important part of a Bill's progress, yet he is making no proposals about that, and it is not being curtailed.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because he makes a very good point about the Committee stage of private Members' Bills—there is one that I particularly support and I hope to be a member of the Committee. What I am asking for is not to abandon these sitting days, but to have certainty about when they will be available. We are grateful that the first ones have been listed, but if we are to have further days for consideration of private Members' Bills, as the Leader of the House seemed to suggest, surely it is only right, proper and appropriate that they are listed now, so that we get that certainty. We have to make a massive effort—maybe not the effort that the hon. Gentleman has to make—to get to this House readily and easily. It is not easy to get down here and back from Perthshire on a Friday. This is about ensuring certainty about the dates. The Leader of the House suggested that there might be further days; all we are asking is that we get them in place.

I will end by saying a little about private Members' Bills and their importance to the House. Our constituents like private Members' Bills. I can tell new Members that they will probably be lobbied on private Members' Bills more than on any other pieces of legislation in their time as Members of Parliament. People like that private Members' Bills are usually cross-party and consensual, and they like the way that private Members' Bills are usually on issues that they feel are important to them, so let us make sure that we respect our constituents' wishes. Given the vacuity of the Government's legislative programme, it also has to be said that private Members' Bills will probably be the most interesting and exciting Bills that we will consider in this Session, so let us make sure that we get the necessary time to consider them properly.

I will end with one plea. Of course we will support the amendments, but let us get the whole issue of private Members' Bills properly resolved, so that we do not have my friend the hon. Member for Shipley continuing to talk them out.

9.4 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. As a new Member, I hope you will excuse me for not being entirely au fait with all the rules and procedures of this place. When it comes to the big principles, however, I can say that I was elected by the people of Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport to create action, and to shine a light on some of the historic procedures that we have in this place.

The motion strikes me as incredibly sound and reasonable. It proposes that in a normal parliamentary Session, which is generally a year, a set number of days should be allotted to private Members' Bills, as should happen in the case of Opposition day debates.

Philip Davies: And ballots.

Luke Pollard: Indeed.

If the procedures are to be changed in such a way that a year becomes two years—the Session becomes larger and the aeon, or era, goes on for longer—we should reflect that in the way we operate in this place.

I am frustrated because I did not come into Parliament to talk about procedure, and part of me really dislikes my standing up and speaking in this way. I was elected to come here and deliver action. If the Government are not able to implement their manifesto because of the arithmetic of this place and the unpopularity of some of their policies—both on their own Benches and among the public—Back Benchers on both sides of the House should be able to introduce legislation that will make a difference, be it small in some cases or large in others. It is the promise of Westminster to all Back Benchers that they will be able to change the law of the land to help their constituents, and that is what I think we should be discussing here today.

Having watched the proceedings of the House on television, I am now part of those proceedings as a new Member. The idea of filibustering on Bills is something that the majority of our electorate find abhorrent. They want to see politicians achieve change by having debates. The possibility that we will not have opportunities to introduce legislation is something that I imagine people in Plymouth and elsewhere will find a little curious.

I do not want to play procedural games, if only because I am surrounded by people who are, I fear, much better at it than I am. Let me simply say that if we are to have a Session that lasts for two years, not one, it seems logical and fair to me—both as a new Member and as someone who is trying my best to represent the people who elected me—for the number of private Members' Bills to be scaled according to the length of the Session.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Is it not also an issue that our constituents who are watching all this expect us to come here for a certain number of days? The fact that Her Majesty's Opposition are absolutely totally useless, and would really rather we were not here at all—[HON. MEMBERS: "Her Majesty's Opposition?"] I am happy to replace the word "useless" with a number of other adjectives. But is it not also true that our constituents expect us to be here for 13 sitting Fridays, when we can discuss private Members' Bills?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. As someone who fought the 2010 and 2015 general elections, I spent seven years trying to get to this place, and I do not mind spending a few more on sitting Fridays, helping legislation along the way.

What worries me about this debate is that, to the average folk in Plymouth, it looks as though we are playing procedural games. We are not spending the time debating food banks or the crisis in our national health service. We are not looking into why the M5 stops at Exeter and does not extend to the Tamar bridge and Plymouth. We are not discussing the issues that arise on the doorstep. We are discussing procedural games because the Government have chosen to play those procedural games, cancelling the Queen's Speech and elongating this Session without correspondingly carrying over measures in a fair way. That tactic strikes me as a 1970s throwback and something that should have been consigned to the past. We should be striving for a 21st-century Parliament with 21st-century procedures and policies, which would enable Back Benchers to introduce legislation if they so chose.

Philip Davies: Has the hon. Gentleman told the Opposition Chief Whip that tonight will mark the end of procedural games in Parliament? According to my experience of being on the Opposition Benches, procedural games are one of the few things that Oppositions have at their disposal to try to cause trouble for the Government. Has the hon. Gentleman clarified with the Chief Whip that the Labour party is tonight ruling out the use of procedural games during the current Parliament?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention—I think that is the polite response I am supposed to give. I want to talk about food banks and the issues that really matter. I appreciate that he has strong views on the matter, but so do I. My view is that the opportunity that Back-Bench Members have to bring forward legislation in a two-year Session should be proportionate to that which they have in a single-year Session.

My name was not drawn in the private Members' Bills ballot, but if it had been I would bring forward legislation to extend the voting franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, which I think would be a perfect antidote to what is happening in this debate. Instead of locking ourselves in the past with procedures that do not reflect the everyday, common decency of the pub that would say, "If you have a one-year Session, you have this number of days for private Members' Bills; if you extend the Session by this much, you extend the numbers of days by this much," we could talk about how to get young people involved in politics, which would hopefully shine a light on the workings of this House and make them better and fairer.

When I go back to Plymouth for the recess, I want to be able to hold my head up high and say that I was defending my constituents' rights and responsibilities in this place. As a lowly Back Bencher, I want to be able to support other Back Benchers bringing forward legislation that could make a difference. The Government seem to be caught like a rabbit in the headlights of their party's right wing, unable to bring forward the manifesto that they were elected on, unable to propose the solutions that we really need, and unable to stand up to scrutiny on various issues. Let us bring forward those debates on WASPI and the public sector pay cap, and the private Members' Bills that would allow each and every one of us to adjust something along the way. For a baker's dozen of extra private Members' Bills, I hope that the House will support the amendment.

9.11 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Opposition's view on the motion is not about causing trouble; it is about maintaining an important democratic principle of this House, which is that in a two-year Session that has already been declared it is perfectly legitimate and fair that the Government should allocate a proportionate number of days for private Members' Bills. They could do that tonight if they wanted to. That is why we support the amendments on the Order Paper.

I want to refer briefly to some of the successful private Members' Bills that reached the statute book in 2016-17, to illustrate the importance of that route and of sitting Fridays. The Merchant Shipping (Homosexual Conduct) Act 2017, introduced by the hon. Member for

[*Angela Smith*]

Salisbury (John Glen), is really important legislation that omits from the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 the sections that make homosexual acts grounds for dismissal from the crew of merchant ships. It makes society fairer and eliminates very serious discrimination from the statute book.

Mr Kevan Jones: The need for that legislation came to light when we were passing the Armed Forces Act, when we were able to remove that provision in relation to the armed forces but not in relation to the merchant navy. That came forward as a private Member's Bill, rather than the Government using their time to do it.

Angela Smith: My hon. Friend strengthens and enhances my point. We need the route offered to us by private Members' Bills to correct failures by Government to deal with such important issues.

The Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), has already referred to the very important measure introduced by the previous Member for Banff and Buchan, Eilidh Whiteford, the Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Act 2017, which relates to ratification of the Istanbul convention. The House overwhelmingly agreed to that on a sitting Friday through the private Member's Bill route, yet even now the Government have not acted upon the instructions of the House. Rather than denying the democratic rights of Members of this House, the Government would do better to spend their time ensuring that the democratic will of the House is observed in letter and in spirit.

Finally, I want to refer to two measures predating 2016-17. My Bill did not immediately make it on to the statute book but became law when the dangerous dogs legislation made it possible to prosecute people for dog attacks that occurred on private property. It took about five years to get it on to the statute book, but we got there in the end. The private Member's Bill route—the Friday sittings—made that possible.

The co-operation of both Front Benches in the closing months of the 2010-15 Government made possible the Control of Horses Act 2015, introduced by the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). Why can we not have that co-operation now? If the Government believe in consensus, they should act on it and give us the time on Fridays.

9.15 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I will be brief. Unusually, I find myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). We are perpetuating the myth that we as individual Back Benchers are legislators; other than in very rare cases, we are not. The reality is that if any Bill does not attract the veto of the hon. Gentleman or of anyone who cares to join him and does not have Government approval, it will most probably be procedurally talked out by a Minister standing at the Dispatch Box and making sure it does not pass. Unless and until we as a House decide we want to make this system work, it is a sham, and we are fooling the public into believing that Bills will be passed that never stand a snowball's chance in hell of doing so.

9.16 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I started the day, as perhaps did some others, by listening to an excerpt of “Night of the Living Dead” to commemorate the passing of George Romero, the creator of the modern-day zombie, and now, twice in one evening, we are discussing the zombie Government that those on Treasury Bench have become. While they have lost their majority, and some would say their authority, they do have control of the parliamentary timetable and are turning the screws on that. We have heard about the disappearing Opposition days, and now we turn to the topic of private Members' Bills.

I listened carefully to what the Leader of the House said, but it was vague in the extreme. We are still no clearer on whether we will have the commensurate increase in the number of Opposition days that this unusually long two-year Parliament demands; it should be 26 days, not 13, and nothing less.

Let us think about some of the contents of the ill-fated Conservative manifesto that did not make it into the Queen's Speech, such as the dementia tax. I remember the Prime Minister was in my constituency when she came a bit unstuck; all the TV pictures were of one of my constituents arguing on the doorstep with her about the detail of that. The 25-year environment plan does not seem to have made it into the Queen's Speech either, and nor do grammar schools or foxhunting; all these bits of the manifesto are on the scrapheap. The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office said the other day that the Conservatives do not have a “monopoly on wisdom” and the Prime Minister was inviting suggestions; if they are bereft of ideas, private Members' Bills on a Friday are a good way of plugging that gap.

It has been said before that our constituents send us to this place because they want us to debate issues and vote on legislation. In the last Parliament, I cut my teeth in Opposition days and private Members' Bill debates on Fridays. The first topics I spoke on were our Wednesday debates on the NHS. I was never lucky enough to have my blue-sky thinking translated into anything that would get on to the statute book, but I did attend Friday debates on private Members' Bills promoted by hon. Friends: the Off-patent Drugs Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), and the Hospital Parking Charges (Exemption for Carers) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper). None of them saw the light of day as they were filibustered out of existence by certain Members; I will not name names—although they are on the Government Benches. [*Interruption.*] Yes, the Bills that did make it were the ones that had the Government's fingerprints all over them—the handout Bills. I remember being involved in a complex radio services Bill in which someone was going on ad infinitum about their favourite radio stations and pop groups. To the public outside, this looks like a denial of democracy; it looks really bad.

When private Members' Bills are given the time they need and properly debated, they represent Parliament at its best. People remember September 2015 when we debated the Assisted Dying Bill. A lot of Members came in on that Friday. The numbers for the vote were 118 and 330, so it is possible to get Members here on a

Friday if things are given time. Okay, the Bill did not change the law, but the debates on both sides had a good airing.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), speaking for the Scottish National party, mentioned the vote on the Istanbul convention, which also took place on a Friday, as did a vote this February on vital legislation on violence against women and girls. The zombie Parliament is carrying on, however.

We can construct a long list of things that have changed the way in which modern society operates, the origins of which were in private Members' Bills. Examples included the decriminalisation in 1967 of homosexual acts between two consenting adults over the age of 21, the ending of the death penalty and the legalisation of abortion. All those changes came from private Members' Bills. Hunting with dogs has cropped up a number of times; it was under a Labour Government that foxhunting was outlawed. The plans for a free vote on that under this Government seem to have bitten the dust as well.

Members have said that the Procedure Committee has recommended reforms to private Members' Bill procedures. However, the Government do not appear to be entertaining the idea of reversing the filibuster farce and the curtailing of debate. They have dismissed those concerns out of hand. During this Parliament, we have seen how my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) have secured the revenge of the Back Benchers. That is what happens in a zombie Parliament, and it should be encouraged by allowing the commensurate amount of debate on private Members' Bills for a two-year Parliament. We need 26 days, and nothing less.

This is part of a pattern. No Select Committees are to be constituted before the autumn. We saw the withdrawal of Short money in the last Parliament, and the Conservatives' 2017 manifesto had a lot of really illiberal constitutional stuff in it. For example, they were soldiering on with their boundary reviews for 2015 registrants for an election that will not happen until 2022—or will it? Do they know something that we do not? This has gone beyond an issue solely for constitutional anoraks. An e-petition on the reform of private Members' Bill procedures last year got 50,697 signatures. I urge everyone to support the amendment calling for a pro rata allocation of the time to debate such Bills. We need 26 days, and nothing less. Do not let the zombies win, because democracy will be the loser.

9.22 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I want to speak to my amendment, but first I want to respond immediately to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who said that I should declare my interest. I would argue that of all Members in the House, I probably have the least interest in extending the number of days this year, because I came top of the ballot. It is those Members who came further down the ballot—at No. 5, No. 10, No. 15 and No. 20, for example—who perhaps have a greater interest in this. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman and all other hon. Members will unite on 20 October and turn up here to vote for my Bill to ensure that our emergency workers do not get spat at and attacked when they are doing their work. I hope that my Bill will attract his support, briefly, and that of Government Ministers. We have yet to see whether that will happen.

The hon. Gentleman rightly said that the Standing Orders provide for 13 private Members' Bill days in a Session, but that is not true when we have a short Session, is it? We just curtail in those circumstances; we do not say that we have to have another six private Members' Bill days before the end of the Session. The truth is that this is a bit of a conundrum, but it is the Government who have the power to decide the length of the Session. That is why it is only fair play for the Government, when they decide that a Session is to last for two years, to provide two years' worth of private Members' Bill days.

The hon. Gentleman says that there should be a second ballot. That might be a great idea, but only the Government can table an amendment to that effect—

Philip Davies indicated dissent.

Chris Bryant: No, no. If we had tabled such an amendment to today's business, it would not have been selectable. There is no way that we could have tabled it today. The only thing that is open to us is to table the extra 13 days.

To be absolutely clear, my amendment would add another 13 days and therefore give many hon. and right hon. Members a further opportunity to get legislation on the statute book. Why does that matter? The first thing that we get asked by every sixth-former is, "If you had a chance to change the law, what is the one thing that you would do?" We are all used to answering that question, and we sometimes get that chance. I just think that more of us should have that opportunity. In this two-year Parliament, we could have ten-minute rule Bills or presentation Bills or Bills from people in the private Members' Bills ballot.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: I am not going to give way, because I look forward to hearing the hon. Gentleman just say yes on 20 October.

If the Government wanted, they could make a Session last five years. Would there be only 13 days for private Members' Bills then? In theory, yes, but according to the laws of moral justice in this House, I would say not. Why do I not trust the Government on this? The Leader of the House has said a couple of times on Thursday mornings that she is minded to look at adding extra days, but she then tabled a motion that allows for 13 days through to 23 November 2018. That does not suggest to me that she thinks there should be the proportionate number for two years. In this case, we are not being given the argument straight. I tabled my amendment for an additional 13 days, because if the Government win the vote today, I do not believe that the Leader of the House will come back with another motion for any more days.

When Richard Crossman introduced the Standing Order that we are dealing with today, he allowed for 22 private Member's Bill days a year, saying:

"This reflects the increasing importance which Private Members' Bills have assumed in the last year or two; and I am pleased to see from the reports so far published about the subjects likely to be selected by Members successful in this year's Ballot that hon. Members are still prepared to come forward with bold proposals for the solution of social problems of the day."—[Official Report, 14 November 1967; Vol. 754, c. 259.]

[*Chris Bryant*]

That was in 1967, when they had just passed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) was right to say, a Bill that partially decriminalised homosexuality. It did not go the whole way, and it took a considerable period for that to happen. It was not until a Labour Government had to push it through the House of Lords using the Parliament Act that we ended up with an even and equal age of consent. However, it started as a private Member's Bill and then became a Government Bill. As my hon. Friend also said, the end of the death penalty came through because Members battled month after month, and votes for women happened because people tabled private Members' Bills year after year and made Parliament make up its mind. In the end, it was a Government Bill that allowed women the vote in 1918—100 years ago next year.

Tomorrow will be the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality. Every single one of us would like to have done something as historic as that, and if we hung up our boots or the voters chucked us out at the next general election, that is absolutely fine. All we are trying to do today is say, “You know what? We could make private Members' legislation better. We could make good Bills that don't just depend on Ministers.” The Government Members I know are real parliamentarians and would desperately love to do something as significant as the things that we are talking about tonight, which is why I beg, urge and implore them to vote for my amendment tonight. They will know that they will have done a good thing.

9.28 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): In the previous debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) talked about the power of the Executive not only over controlling the agenda, but over ensuring that laws that are in manifestos get through. However, we are in a unique position in this two-year Session of Parliament. As my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and for Rhondda said, the important thing is that private Members' Bills are sometimes big pieces of legislation that are too hot to handle—too hot for the Government to put through.

Many private Members' Bills have gone through this House that make a real difference to people's lives. I introduced the Christmas Day (Trading) Act 2004, which means that large shops cannot open on Christmas day—the Act was good for shop workers who were forced to work on Christmas day. In the same Session, Jim Sheridan, the former hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, introduced the Gangmasters (Licensing) Act 2004, which brought in tough regulation following the tragedy at Morecambe bay to try to protect people from being exploited by gangmasters. Private Members' Bills can make a real change to people's lives.

I am a bit concerned that the Leader of the House says she is minded to announce additional days. How many additional days would she like to propose, and what are the criteria for introducing them? The current logic is that 13 days will be spread over a two-year Session. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made the argument, with which I have some sympathy,

that it is in the Government's hands to move an amendment if they wish to have another ballot for private Members' Bills in the second year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, in the 2015-16 Session, 20% of successful private Members' Bills did not come through the ballot but came through the ten-minute rule procedure and other routes. The hon. Member for Shipley is arguing that, somehow, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and others who have been successful in the ballot will have an unfair advantage, but I am not sure that will be the case. Other hon. Members will have a chance to get their private Members' Bills on the statute book.

The hon. Member for Shipley thinks of himself as a great filibusterer on a Friday, but he pales into insignificance compared with the former right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the great Eric Forth, with whom I successfully did a deal to pass my private Member's Bill because he wanted to stop a Bill lower down the Order Paper.

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) mentioned the proposal to move debates on private Members' Bills to Tuesday and Wednesday nights, thereby getting round the travel difficulties of Scottish National party Members on Fridays. Are private Members' Bills an area ripe for reform? Yes, they are. We must not only show our constituents that we are listening to them but must enact Bills that are relevant to them. Private Members' legislation is important.

I am not sure whether the Government have limited Friday sittings by mistake, or because they want to keep the decks clear or to ensure that nothing controversial is introduced in the next two years, as some Government Back Benchers might vote against the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda made the fundamental point that there are few opportunities in this place to change legislation, but we can do it in Bill Committees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge mentioned the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the merchant navy, which was originally raised during the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2016. We managed to get the discriminatory legislation on the merchant navy changed through a private Member's Bill with the Government's agreement. Again, the issue had been overlooked for many years, and it was only because of our scrutiny in this House that we could get rid of that discriminatory legislation on the military and the merchant navy. So I would support the amendments. It is nonsense to suggest that by giving these additional days the world is going to stop—it is not. It is going to allow Back Benchers, either through the ballot or through private Members' business, to ensure that their voices are heard and that they can make a real difference in trying to get some of those Bills past even the hon. Member for Shipley.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 315.

Division No. 8]

[9.35 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi

Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike

Antoniuzzi, Tonia	Esterson, Bill	Laird, Lesley	Reed, Mr Steve
Ashworth, Jonathan	Evans, Chris	Lamb, rh Norman	Rees, Christina
Austin, Ian	Farrelly, Paul	Lammy, rh Mr David	Reeves, Ellie
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Fellows, Marion	Lavery, Ian	Reeves, Rachel
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Field, rh Frank	Law, Chris	Reynolds, Jonathan
Beckett, rh Margaret	Fitzpatrick, Jim	Lee, Ms Karen	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Betts, Mr Clive	Fletcher, Colleen	Leslie, Mr Chris	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Blackford, Ian	Flint, rh Caroline	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Rodda, Matt
Blackman, Kirsty	Flynn, Paul	Lewis, Clive	Rowley, Danielle
Bloomfield, Paul	Fovargue, Yvonne	Lewis, Mr Ivan	Ruane, Chris
Brabin, Tracy	Foxcroft, Vicky	Linden, David	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Frith, James	Lloyd, Tony	Ryan, rh Joan
Brennan, Kevin	Furniss, Gill	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Shah, Naz
Brown, Alan	Gaffney, Hugh	Lucas, Caroline	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Brown, Lyn	Gapes, Mike	Lucas, Ian C.	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Gardiner, Barry	Lynch, Holly	Sheppard, Tommy
Bryant, Chris	George, Ruth	Madders, Justin	Sherriff, Paula
Buck, Ms Karen	Gethins, Stephen	Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Burden, Richard	Gibson, Patricia	Mahmood, Shabana	Siddiq, Tulip
Burgon, Richard	Gill, Preet Kaur	Malhotra, Seema	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Butler, Dawn	Glindon, Mary	Mann, John	Slaughter, Andy
Byrne, rh Liam	Godsiff, Mr Roger	Marsden, Gordon	Smeeth, Ruth
Cadbury, Ruth	Goodman, Helen	Martin, Sandy	Smith, Angela
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Grady, Patrick	Maskell, Rachael	Smith, Cat
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Grant, Peter	Matheson, Christian	Smith, Eleanor
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Gray, Neil	Mc Nally, John	Smith, Laura
Carden, Dan	Green, Kate	McCabe, Steve	Smith, Nick
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Greenwood, Lilian	McCarthy, Kerry	Smith, Owen
Champion, Sarah	Greenwood, Margaret	McDonagh, Siobhain	Smyth, Karin
Chapman, Douglas	Griffith, Nia	McDonald, Andy	Snell, Gareth
Chapman, Jenny	Grogan, John	McDonald, Stewart	Sobel, Alex
Charalambous, Bambos	Gwynne, Andrew	Malcolm	Spellar, rh John
Cherry, Joanna	Haigh, Louise	McDonald, Stuart C.	Starmer, rh Keir
Clwyd, rh Ann	Hamilton, Fabian	McDonnell, rh John	Stephens, Chris
Coaker, Vernon	Hanson, rh David	McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Stevens, Jo
Coffey, Ann	Hardy, Emma	McGinn, Conor	Stringer, Graham
Cooper, Julie	Harman, rh Ms Harriet	McGovern, Alison	Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
Cooper, Rosie	Harris, Carolyn	McInnes, Liz	Swinson, Jo
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hayes, Helen	McKinnell, Catherine	Tami, Mark
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hayman, Sue	McMahon, Jim	Thewliss, Alison
Coyle, Neil	Healey, rh John	McMorrin, Anna	Thomas, Gareth
Crausby, Sir David	Hendrick, Mr Mark	Mearns, Ian	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Creagh, Mary	Hendry, Drew	Miliband, rh Edward	Thornberry, rh Emily
Creasy, Stella	Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Moon, Mrs Madeleine	Timms, rh Stephen
Cruddas, Jon	Hermon, Lady	Morden, Jessica	Trickett, Jon
Cryer, John	Hill, Mike	Morgan, Stephen	Turley, Anna
Cummins, Judith	Hillier, Meg	Morris, Grahame	Turner, Karl
Cunningham, Alex	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Murray, Ian	Twigg, Derek
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Nandy, Lisa	Twigg, Stephen
Dakin, Nic	Hollern, Kate	Newlands, Gavin	Twist, Liz
David, Wayne	Hopkins, Kelvin	Norris, Alex	Umunna, Chuka
Davies, Geraint	Howarth, rh Mr George	O'Hara, Brendan	Vaz, rh Keith
Day, Martyn	Huq, Dr Rupa	O'Mara, Jared	Vaz, Valerie
De Cordova, Marsha	Hussain, Imran	Oñasanya, Fiona	Walker, Thelma
De Piero, Gloria	Jardine, Christine	Onn, Melanie	Watson, Tom
Dent Coad, Emma	Jarvis, Dan	Onwurah, Chi	West, Catherine
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet	Johnson, Diana	Osamor, Kate	Western, Matt
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Jones, Darren	Owen, Albert	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Dodds, Anneliese	Jones, Gerald	Peacock, Stephanie	Whitfield, Martin
Doughty, Stephen	Jones, Graham	Pearce, Teresa	Whitford, Dr Philippa
Dowd, Peter	Jones, Helen	Pennycook, Matthew	Williams, Dr Paul
Drew, Dr David	Jones, Mr Kevan	Perkins, Toby	Williamson, Chris
Dromey, Jack	Jones, Sarah	Phillips, Jess	Wilson, Phil
Duffield, Rosie	Jones, Susan Elan	Phillipson, Bridget	Wishart, Pete
Eagle, Ms Angela	Kane, Mike	Pidcock, Laura	Woodcock, John
Eagle, Maria	Keeley, Barbara	Platt, Jo	Yasin, Mohammad
Edwards, Jonathan	Kendall, Liz	Pollard, Luke	Zeichner, Daniel
Efford, Clive	Killen, Gerard	Pound, Stephen	
Elliott, Julie	Kinnock, Stephen	Powell, Lucy	
Ellman, Mrs Louise	Kyle, Peter	Qureshi, Yasmin	
Elmore, Chris		Rashid, Faisal	
		Rayner, Angela	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dockerill, Julia
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine

Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon

Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddlestone, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy

Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie

Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David

Tellers for the Noes:
Nigel Adams and
David Rutley

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment proposed: (b), leave out from 'That' to end and insert:

' notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 14(8) relating to the number of Fridays on which Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business, Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 20 and 27 October, 3 and 10 November, 1 and 8 December 2017, 19 and 26 January, 2, 16 and 23 February, 16 March, 27 April, 11 and 18 May, 15 and 22 June, 6 and 13 July, 19 and 26 October, 16 and 23 November 2018, 18 January, 15 February and 15 March 2019.'—
(Chris Bryant)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 287, Noes 316.

Division No. 9]

[9.53 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Chapman, Douglas	Eagle, Ms Angela	Keeley, Barbara
Abrahams, Debbie	Chapman, Jenny	Eagle, Maria	Kendall, Liz
Alexander, Heidi	Charalambous, Bamboos	Edwards, Jonathan	Khan, Afzal
Ali, Rushanara	Cherry, Joanna	Efford, Clive	Killen, Gerard
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Clwyd, rh Ann	Elliott, Julie	Kinnock, Stephen
Amesbury, Mike	Coaker, Vernon	Ellman, Mrs Louise	Kyle, Peter
Antoniuzzi, Tonia	Coffey, Ann	Elmore, Chris	Laird, Lesley
Ashworth, Jonathan	Cooper, Julie	Esterson, Bill	Lamb, rh Norman
Austin, Ian	Cooper, Rosie	Evans, Chris	Lammy, rh Mr David
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Cooper, rh Yvette	Farrelly, Paul	Lavery, Ian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Fellows, Marion	Law, Chris
Beckett, rh Margaret	Coyle, Neil	Field, rh Frank	Lee, Ms Karen
Betts, Mr Clive	Crausby, Sir David	Fitzpatrick, Jim	Leslie, Mr Chris
Blackford, Ian	Creagh, Mary	Fletcher, Colleen	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Blackman, Kirsty	Creasy, Stella	Flint, rh Caroline	Lewis, Clive
Blomfield, Paul	Cruddas, Jon	Flynn, Paul	Lewis, Mr Ivan
Brabin, Tracy	Cryer, John	Fovargue, Yvonne	Linden, David
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cummins, Judith	Foxcroft, Vicky	Lloyd, Tony
Brennan, Kevin	Cunningham, Alex	Frith, James	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Brown, Alan	Cunningham, Mr Jim	Furniss, Gill	Lucas, Caroline
Brown, Lyn	Dakin, Nic	Gaffney, Hugh	Lucas, Ian C.
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	David, Wayne	Gapes, Mike	Lynch, Holly
Bryant, Chris	Davies, Geraint	Gardiner, Barry	Madders, Justin
Buck, Ms Karen	Day, Martyn	George, Ruth	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Burden, Richard	De Cordova, Marsha	Gethins, Stephen	Mahmood, Shabana
Burgon, Richard	De Piero, Gloria	Gibson, Patricia	Malhotra, Seema
Butler, Dawn	Dent Coad, Emma	Gill, Preet Kaur	Mann, John
Byrne, rh Liam	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet	Glindon, Mary	Marsden, Gordon
Cadbury, Ruth	Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Godsiff, Mr Roger	Martin, Sandy
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Dodds, Anneliese	Goodman, Helen	Maskell, Rachael
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Doughty, Stephen	Grady, Patrick	Matheson, Christian
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Dowd, Peter	Grant, Peter	Mc Nally, John
Carden, Dan	Drew, Dr David	Gray, Neil	McCabe, Steve
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Dromey, Jack	Green, Kate	McCarthy, Kerry
Champion, Sarah	Duffield, Rosie	Greenwood, Lilian	McDonagh, Siobhain
		Greenwood, Margaret	McDonald, Andy
		Griffith, Nia	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
		Grogan, John	McDonald, Stuart C.
		Gwynne, Andrew	McDonnell, rh John
		Haigh, Louise	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
		Hamilton, Fabian	McGinn, Conor
		Hanson, rh David	McGovern, Alison
		Hardy, Emma	McInnes, Liz
		Harman, rh Ms Harriet	McKinnell, Catherine
		Harris, Carolyn	McMahon, Jim
		Hayes, Helen	McMorrin, Anna
		Hayman, Sue	Mearns, Ian
		Healey, rh John	Miliband, rh Edward
		Hendrick, Mr Mark	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
		Hendry, Drew	Morden, Jessica
		Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Morgan, Stephen
		Hermon, Lady	Morris, Grahame
		Hill, Mike	Murray, Ian
		Hillier, Meg	Nandy, Lisa
		Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Newlands, Gavin
		Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Norris, Alex
		Hollern, Kate	O'Hara, Brendan
		Hopkins, Kelvin	O'Mara, Jared
		Howarth, rh Mr George	Onasanya, Fiona
		Huq, Dr Rupa	Onn, Melanie
		Hussain, Imran	Onwurah, Chi
		Jardine, Christine	Osamor, Kate
		Jarvis, Dan	Owen, Albert
		Johnson, Diana	Peacock, Stephanie
		Jones, Darren	Pearce, Teresa
		Jones, Gerald	Pennycook, Matthew
		Jones, Graham	Perkins, Toby
		Jones, Helen	Phillips, Jess
		Jones, Mr Kevan	Phillipson, Bridget
		Jones, Sarah	Pidcock, Laura
		Jones, Susan Elan	Platt, Jo
		Kane, Mike	Pollard, Luke

Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris

Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sweeney, Mr Paul J.
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve

Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn

Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dockerill, Julia
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Luke
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy

Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pengelly, Emma
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda

Mills, Nigel	Skidmore, Chris
Milton, rh Anne	Smith, Chloe
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Smith, Henry
Moore, Damien	Smith, Julian
Mordaunt, Penny	Smith, Royston
Morgan, rh Nicky	Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Morris, Anne Marie	Soubry, rh Anna
Morris, David	Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Morris, James	Spencer, Mark
Morton, Wendy	Stephenson, Andrew
Mundell, rh David	Stevenson, John
Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Stewart, Bob
Murrison, Dr Andrew	Stewart, Iain
Neill, Robert	Stewart, Rory
Newton, Sarah	Streeter, Mr Gary
Nokes, Caroline	Stride, rh Mel
Norman, Jesse	Stuart, Graham
O'Brien, Neil	Sturdy, Julian
Offord, Dr Matthew	Sunak, Rishi
Opperman, Guy	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Paisley, Ian	Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Parish, Neil	Syms, Mr Robert
Patel, rh Priti	Thomas, Derek
Paterson, rh Mr Owen	Thomson, Ross
Pawsey, Mark	Throup, Maggie
Penning, rh Mike	Tolhurst, Kelly
Penrose, John	Tomlinson, Justin
Percy, Andrew	Tomlinson, Michael
Perry, Claire	Tracey, Craig
Philp, Chris	Tredinnick, David
Pincher, Christopher	Trevyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Poulter, Dr Dan	Truss, rh Elizabeth
Pow, Rebecca	Tugendhat, Tom
Prentis, Victoria	Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Prisk, Mr Mark	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Pritchard, Mark	Vickers, Martin
Pursglove, Tom	Villiers, rh Theresa
Quin, Jeremy	Walker, Mr Charles
Quince, Will	Walker, Mr Robin
Raab, Dominic	Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Redwood, rh John	Warburton, David
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob	Warman, Matt
Robertson, Mr Laurence	Whately, Helen
Robinson, Gavin	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Robinson, Mary	Whittaker, Craig
Ross, Douglas	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Rowley, Lee	Wiggin, Bill
Rudd, rh Amber	Williamson, rh Gavin
Sandbach, Antoinette	Wilson, Sammy
Scully, Paul	Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Seely, Mr Bob	Wood, Mike
Selous, Andrew	Wragg, Mr William
Shannon, Jim	Wright, rh Jeremy
Shapps, rh Grant	Zahawi, Nadhim
Sharma, Alok	
Shelbrooke, Alec	
Simpson, David	
Simpson, rh Mr Keith	

Tellers for the Noes:
Nigel Adams and
David Rutley

Question accordingly negatived.

Main question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Private Members' Bills shall have precedence over Government business on 20 October, 3 November, 1 December 2017, 19 January, 2 and 23 February, 16 March, 27 April, 11 May, 15 June, 6 July, 26 October and 23 November 2018.

Business without Debate

USE OF THE CHAMBER (UNITED KINGDOM YOUTH PARLIAMENT)

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the work of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament in providing young people with an opportunity to engage with the political process; recognises the positive contribution to such engagement provided by the annual meetings of the Youth Parliament in the Chamber of this House; and accordingly resolves that the UK Youth Parliament should be allowed to meet once a year in the Chamber of this House for the duration of this Parliament.—(Andrea Leadsom.)

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order for this place to record that as a result of Labour's filibustering tonight, this Chamber will not debate the appalling abuse that many women Conservative candidates endured during the general election from the hard left? Would it also be in order for this place to record that there are many Conservative Members who stood up for Labour women when they were abused by their hard-left leadership?

Mr Speaker: I can assure the right hon. Lady that her conduct on this occasion has been entirely orderly. It was open to her to raise that matter in the way that she did, and she has done so.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order for me to say that it has been suggested to me that I did not raise the point as to quite how useless Her Majesty's Government are during the last debate? I would like to put that on the record, if I may.

Mr Speaker: Not only is that cheeky, but it is evident from her rather guilty smile that the hon. Lady herself is aware of the nature and extent of the cheekiness. The hon. Lady advised me that she wished to raise a point of order to correct the record because she felt that she had misspoken, so I thought there was going to be an air of contrition, not an attempt to score a party political point. But what the hon. Lady has said is on the record. Let us now preserve an orderly atmosphere as the Secretary of State for Transport makes his way to the Dispatch Box to deliver his statement.

HS2 Update

10.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I am grateful to you for allowing this statement, Mr Speaker. I am pleased to be here in front of the House tonight. As you know, sometimes these things can happen as a result of cock-up rather than conspiracy.

Today marks a major milestone in the Government's plans to deliver High Speed 2. High Speed 2 will deliver economic growth across the United Kingdom. It will provide the rail network with the capacity we need for the next century, faster journeys and better connections between cities across the UK.

As announced to the House this morning, we will be awarding stage 1 of the main works civil engineering contracts for the phase 1 route from London to Birmingham. This stage primarily covers design and pre-construction activities, although it is worth saying that the initial works have already begun. We expect these contracts to be signed by the end of this month after the completion of the mandatory standstill period. The expected total value of these contracts covering stages 1 and stage 2, which is the full construction phase, is £6.6 billion. They will support around 16,000 jobs across the country and are expected to generate around 7,000 contract opportunities in the supply chain, of which I expect around 60% to go to small and medium-sized enterprises. I have also confirmed the shortlists for the station design contracts and Euston master development partner procurements.

As well as that announcement, today I am introducing the phase 2a High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill to the House. This seeks the powers to construct HS2 from the west midlands to Crewe so that this important section, which links up to the west coast main line just south of Crewe, can open in 2027.

The design of the route set out in the Bill is largely as announced in 2015. However, there are three refinements I have decided to make, following consultation last year. I have decided to move the connection to the west coast main line and the start of a tunnel in Crewe further south. I have also decided to move the construction railhead, and subsequently the infrastructure maintenance facility for this part of HS2, from the Basford area near Crewe to a location near Stone. I am very sensitive to the impact that that could have on the local community, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has diligently drawn to my attention, but I believe this site is a better location from which to construct and maintain phase 2a. The new location near Stone is strategically located midway along the phase 2a route, which means that it can support construction activities heading north and south simultaneously, offering significant programme and construction benefits. Of course, the site at Stone benefits from good transport links, with access to the M6 and the existing rail network right at that location.

In Crewe, moving the railhead from the Basford area avoids planned housing regeneration in that part of Cheshire. It also negates the need for maintenance loops at Pipe Ridware, thereby reducing impacts along the phase 2a route. It is worth saying that that area of Basford is one of Cheshire's most significant economic development and housing development sites, and I have

been very sensitive to that. The construction railhead and infrastructure maintenance facility have been carefully designed so as to minimise impacts locally, particularly on the community of Yarnfield. Having heard local concerns, I have made sure that Yarnfield Lane will remain open.

In preparing the Bill, HS2 Ltd has sought to minimise impacts on the environment and on communities. Following the deposit of the Bill, there will be a consultation on the scheme's environmental statement. That will provide the opportunity to comment on the environmental effects of the proposed phase 2a scheme and the reasonable alternatives considered and reported by HS2 Ltd. The process will result in a report from an independent assessor, which will be provided to all Members of the House before Second Reading.

Turning to Crewe, the HS2 business case has always included two trains per hour stopping at Crewe. The phase 2a Bill includes the interventions needed to support that, but I know that there is a strong ambition to achieve even more. Today, I am therefore launching a consultation on options to develop a Crewe hub. This work shows how such a service pattern could support an HS2 service to Stoke-on-Trent and bring benefits to places like Chester, north and south Wales, Shrewsbury and Derby. Future decisions will be subject to affordability and value for money. Funding the broader vision for a Crewe hub will require national and local government to work together, but I believe that there is the potential to deliver even more benefits.

Finally today, I am announcing my decision on the outstanding sections of the phase 2b route to Manchester and Leeds, which we consulted on last year. After carefully considering the responses to the consultation, I have decided to confirm the following changes to the route. The western leg rolling stock depot will move from a site near Golborne to a site north of Crewe. That site will be included in the full environmental assessment being undertaken for the whole route and I will look carefully at that assessment.

A 26 km section of the route in the Middlewich and Pickmere area of Cheshire will change and be raised as it passes through the Cheshire salt plains, to avoid brining and gas storage infrastructure. The approach to Manchester Piccadilly station will be adjusted to improve operational efficiency and reduce impacts on residential areas and a primary school. The route near East Midlands airport will now closely follow the eastern side of the A42. This avoids tunnelling under the airport and reduces the impacts on some communities. At Long Eaton, after much consultation with the local community, the route will pass through the town on a high viaduct.

The route in South Yorkshire will be the route we consulted on in 2016, which in part follows the M1 and M18, and serves Sheffield city centre via a spur from the HS2 line. I am also asking HS2 Ltd to take forward the provision of a northern junction back on to HS2, giving a city centre to city centre connection between Leeds and Sheffield in less than 30 minutes. That is very important for the development of Northern Powerhouse Rail. We will also continue to work on a possible parkway station.

Finally, I have decided not to proceed with the proposed change of route to the east of Measham. Instead, I am confirming a modified version of the 2013 preferred route to the west of Measham. In Measham itself, the route is

moved approximately 80 metres and the viaduct extended to mitigate commercial property impacts. I have heard the concerns raised by local communities about the proposed eastern leg rolling stock depot at Crofton. HS2 Ltd believes it has found a better option, on which I am now consulting, which is east of Leeds in the Aire valley, adjacent to the M1 on a brownfield site.

I intend to bring forward a third hybrid Bill for phase 2b in 2019. In preparation for that Bill, HS2 Ltd is today launching a consultation on the technical scope and methodology to be used in the environmental and equality impact assessments.

Today's decisions bring certainty for communities who have been unsure of the route for some years. I am updating the safeguarding directions for the phase 2b route to protect the land required for the construction and operation of the line. I can also confirm that the same range of property schemes currently operating for phases 1 and 2a will be available for phase 2b. This goes over and above what is required by law and gives assistance to those along the line of the route. I have also made amendments to some of the detailed urban/rural boundaries for phase 2b and to the treatment of properties around tunnel portals.

A report published today by property specialists Carter Jonas tells us that the particular circumstance of the Shimmer estate development in Mexborough, South Yorkshire means that this package may not allow some homeowners to acquire a similar property in their local area. In the light of the report's findings, I therefore also confirm that the Government will ensure that Shimmer homeowners can secure a comparable home, as referred to in my summary document "High Speed Two: From Concept to Reality", which is also being published today. That is really important.

We need HS2. Since privatisation, the number of passenger journeys on our railways has doubled. It has nearly tripled on the key west coast inter-city corridor. We cannot continue to rely on the legacy of our Victorian forebears, far-sighted though they were. By providing new routes for inter-city services, HS2 will free up space on our existing railways. It will reduce overcrowding and allow options for more varied and frequent services, including for places that currently do not have a good connection to London. This released capacity could allow more freight trains. It could also more than double the current number of peak-time seats on busy services from Manchester Piccadilly towards Stoke and Crewe, and from Leeds towards Wakefield. It has the potential to almost double peak seats from London to Peterborough and east coast destinations further north.

Any significant investment needs to offer good value for money, as HS2 does. Today I am publishing the updated business case for phase 2, which shows that, including the wider economic benefits, the full HS2 network will create £2.30 of benefit for every £1 spent. We want to make the most of our investment in HS2. When phase 1 becomes operational, HS2 trains will run to Manchester, Liverpool, Preston, Warrington, Wigan and Glasgow. Phase 2 will further reduce journey times between London and Glasgow and Edinburgh to around three hours and 40 minutes. To my Scottish colleagues, let me say that we will continue to work with Transport Scotland and Network Rail to look at the best ways of further reducing times, towards an ultimate ambition of a three-hour journey time between London and Scotland.

We are also looking at opportunities to use HS2 to support Northern Powerhouse Rail and Midlands Connect.

Finally, I know that today's announcement will not be welcome news for those living along the line of the route. There will be concern about how HS2 will affect their homes, communities and businesses. That, sadly, is inevitable if we are going to do big projects of this kind for our nation, but I am determined that we will engage extensively with everyone affected and that we will show fairness, compassion and respect. All the products mentioned today are in the Libraries of both Houses.

Our plan for Britain is a plan to build a stronger, fairer country, with an economy that works for everyone—one in which wealth and opportunity are spread across the country and we are set up to succeed in the long term. Investment in economic infrastructure is a key part of this. HS2 will be the new backbone of the UK rail network. It will transform a rail network built for the 19th century into one designed for the 21st century. It will increase capacity and connectivity across our rail network, bring our country closer together and support economic growth. The benefits of HS2 will be felt across the whole of the United Kingdom. I commend the statement to the House.

10.23 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): May I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement? I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for hearing the point of order made earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) about what could be done to encourage the Secretary of State to better inform the House of the crucial decisions that he has reached on one of the most significant and costly pieces of transport infrastructure that this country has proposed for many a year.

Perhaps the Secretary of State will be kind enough to explain what happened earlier today, given the widespread trailing of an oral statement on the anticipated announcement and the House's subsequent disappointment at initially being asked to settle for a written statement, until such time as the outcry seemingly reached the Transport Secretary's ears and his somewhat belated appearance in the Chamber tonight.

Labour has consistently supported HS2 and the attendant benefits it will bring—indeed, we were its initial proposer in 2009—but that support brings with it many questions. On the construction, there are concerns that companies selected to do the work were previously involved in the practice of blacklisting workers. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that no such practices will be tolerated in the delivery of HS2? Far too often in the case of significant projects in recent times, overseas contractors—and several have been awarded contracts here—have brought in their own labour, and have recruited exclusively from jurisdictions outside the United Kingdom. HS2 clearly represents huge employment and career opportunities for apprentices and established workers alike. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the practices we have seen in the construction industry that have excluded British workers from UK projects will not be allowed to obtain in the construction of HS2?

There are also concerns about the financial health of Carillion. What measures has the Secretary of State put in place to ensure that any financial instability of any of

[Andy McDonald]

the contractors will not delay or add to the cost of the project? He said in evidence to the Treasury Committee that it was not his job to monitor conflicts of interest in the delivery of HS2, but given the revelations of the revolving door between HS2 and the engineering firm CH2M, does he accept that he does, in fact, have such an obligation if the public are to have confidence in the arrangements between HS2 and the contractors?

What assurances and guarantees can the Secretary of State give that the total overall cost will not exceed the stated £55.7 billion, and will not spiral, as has been alleged in certain quarters? In one of the many documents published today, we are told that in adopting the M18 route in south Yorkshire, although HS2 Ltd has included in the costs estimate the delivery of a junction north of Sheffield and back to the HS2 main line, it has not costed electrification of the midland main line between Clay Cross and Sheffield Midland, or from Sheffield to the north. Does the Secretary of State intend the line to be electrified in readiness for HS2—and if so, when—or is he working on the basis that trains to Sheffield will be bimodal, and the line will remain unelectrified?

Will the Secretary of State provide further and better particulars of his proposals and preferences in respect of potential parkway stations? Will he also provide an update on the progress of the northern east-west rail and the extension to the north-east—“Crossrail for the north”—and its connection with HS2, and on what discussions he has had with Transport for the North in that regard? Finally, will he reassure the House that his announcement about progress on HS2 will not be followed by an announcement of yet further delays to electrification of the trans-Pennine route?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for the Opposition’s continued support for the HS2 project. I hope that we shall be able to work on it together. I think that the House, or a large proportion of it, is united in believing that the project is necessary to the economic development of the future.

As I said a moment ago, I am very pleased to be here now. I should have preferred to be here earlier, but, as I said, it is sometimes a case of cock-up rather than conspiracy.

Let me begin by saying something about the construction contracts. We have contracted a range of significant British companies as part of the awarding of contracts today. A range of consortiums is participating, and many of them are already an integral part of Crossrail, which is our biggest engineering project—and the biggest in Europe. We have a good team of UK and international organisations that are used to working as a team to deliver big infrastructure projects. However, the assurance that I give the hon. Gentleman and the House is that, as I have made clear all along, the companies that win contracts for HS2—whether construction, design or, ultimately, rolling stock contracts—will be obliged to make a commitment to leave a lasting skills footprint. That means apprenticeship programmes and skills development, and I think the two high-speed college campuses that we have established in Birmingham and Doncaster will help to develop real expertise for the future.

The hon. Gentleman talked about Carillion. Carillion is a big UK construction business which is clearly going through a troubled time, and we all hope that it will pull through, because we want to see British business succeed. However, I can tell him that Carillion is part of a consortium in which all the organisations involved have committed to delivering their part of the contract, and I am confident that whatever the position in respect of Carillion, that consortium will deliver the results that we expect.

The hon. Gentleman talked about conflicts of interest and CH2M. As he is aware, it pulled out of that particular contract. I have every intention of ensuring that we have proper behaviour by companies in future; they will be unable to continue to work for us if they do not do the right thing.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the total cost of the project. Over the past 24 hours there have been some wild rumours about the cost, based on people who are not involved in the project putting a finger in the air. I simply remind the House that it is incredible, inconceivable and simply nonsense to suggest that HS2 will cost five times the amount of HS1 per mile. This project has a total cost attached of £55.7 billion. It is currently on time and on budget, and I expect it to stay that way. In this country we have experience of major projects, such as Crossrail and the Olympics, and we have been pretty good at delivering on time and on budget. I am sure that we will carry on doing so.

The hon. Gentleman asked about electrification of the M18 route. I can confirm that the route from Sheffield Midland north to Leeds will also be electrified to ensure that through services can run to Leeds. That link is also an important part of northern powerhouse rail. On parkways stations, work is continuing to look at the best options. With regard to the whole northern powerhouse rail project, I am waiting for Transport for the North to bring forward its proposals. With regard to trans-Pennine modernisation, nothing has changed.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House to make a statement on this important project at this late time of night—I am willing to discuss HS2 with him any time of the night or day. He has put a great deal of confidence in the contractors he announced today, to which he is awarding £6.6 billion of taxpayers’ money. However, just by glancing at recent news reports, we see that Strabag, an Austrian firm, is pulling out of a hydroelectric plant contract in Bosnia, having sought to increase the contract price. Skanska UK has revealed major project cost overruns and write-downs of £33 million. Costain has yet to reach a settlement for a private finance initiative project contract with the Greater Manchester Waste Disposal Authority, where it has already incurred £15 million of losses. Last December the Health and Safety Commission confirmed that Kier Infrastructure and Overseas Ltd was being prosecuted for three incidents that took place during the construction of the Crossrail tunnel. That is in addition to Carillion’s well documented financial problems, which mean that it is having to restructure. Can he confirm that he knew about all those matters, that he has carried out due diligence on those companies, and that the taxpayer is not in reality carrying unacceptable risks on the construction of HS2?

Chris Grayling: We of course monitor the fitness for contracts of all the companies we award contracts to. The consortia to which we have awarded contracts today are groups of firms that have a track record of delivering major projects for this country, and they also include major British businesses that I want to see succeed. It is really important to ensure that we use the expertise that is already delivering for us and that we also champion British business. The awarding of the contracts does that job.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and for his honesty in admitting that today's proceedings are yet another Government cock-up, which is quite the theme.

I have consistently spoken in favour of High Speed 2, so long as Scotland is not excluded. I therefore welcome the Secretary of State's restatement of the aspiration to have a three-hour journey time to Scotland. By contrast, my scheduled journey time today from Glasgow to London was four and a half hours—50% longer—which shows the real benefits that high-speed rail could bring. However, my understanding is that when high-speed trains run on the existing network north of Crewe they will actually run slower than my train did today. Can he confirm that, and if so, what will be done to look at the rolling stock to try to improve that speed?

Can the Secretary of State also advise on the estimated journey time of three hours and 45 minutes when high-speed trains start running to Glasgow, and how much that reduced journey time will be due to the reduced number of stops? Can he confirm in which investment periods upgrades to the west coast main line north of Crewe will take place? A previous KPMG report highlighted some possible negative impacts in Scotland, including a predicted £220 million drop in economic output in Aberdeenshire, if high-speed rail continues without including Scotland. Has he updated the review of those figures, and if not, why was the Secretary of State for Scotland able to tweet that today's announcements on high-speed rail will bring economic benefits to Scotland?

I want to reiterate the concerns about Carillion, which now has the prefix “troubled” when it is mentioned in the newspapers. What engagement has there been with Scottish companies for bids? Will the Secretary of State uphold his predecessor's commitment that offsite constructions will definitely be in Scotland? With regard to today's announcement about the Crewe hub, can he confirm that it will not be to the detriment of services to Scotland or the funding of upgrades north of Crewe? Finally, I offer the small reminder that the devolution of Network Rail to Scotland would allow the Scottish Government to progress upgrades north of the border much quicker.

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, this project benefits the whole United Kingdom. It will reduce journey times to Scotland, and I am committed to looking at how we ensure those journey times come down on and beyond the HS2 network. I will work closely with my Scottish colleagues to see how best we can achieve that, to deliver what people in Scotland want, which is—*[Interruption.]* Well, I hate to say this to the Scottish National party, but actually we are the ones who just

made ground in Scotland. The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised if I listen to my Scottish colleagues, who seem to me to have their fingers firmly on the pulse of what people in Scotland want. Of course, we will deal with the Scottish Administration, but there is more than one voice for Scotland in this House now.

Service patterns for the future will ultimately depend on timetabling much closer to the time, but I expect to see genuine benefits for people across the network served by HS2 in Scotland, the north of England and north Wales. This investment will lead to better services all around the country. It will deliver better services from the east coast ports; I see my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) in his place, and there is a real opportunity to open new routes to those ports on the existing east coast main line. There is a real opportunity to improve the services to cities off the HS2 network that will be served by HS2 trains—Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Preston, Liverpool. This will benefit people on a very widespread basis.

The hon. Gentleman talks about a drop in economic activity. This is a huge project that will feed the supply chain all around the United Kingdom. So this will be good news for Scottish business, good news for English business, good news for Welsh business and good news for Northern Irish business. This is good news for the United Kingdom as a whole.

The hon. Gentleman talked about Carillion. I would hope that everyone in this House would share my ambition that a British company going through a troubled period pulls through and has a stronger future, and I see no reason, when it is part of a consortium that has agreed collectively to deliver for us, why we should hold its current position against it and take away an opportunity that might help that business recover.

Lastly, I do not see how delivering on a Crewe hub that will help connections to north Wales, for example, should in any way disadvantage Scotland.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I am profoundly and deeply opposed to phase 2, which goes straight through my constituency from top to bottom. Will he confirm that Yarnfield Lane will be kept open, as he said in his statement, and reconfirm his personal assurance to me that he has instructed officials to prepare plans for a deeper and longer tunnel at Whitmore, Baldwin's Gate and Madeley, and that he will give renewed consideration to the introduction of property bonds, which I have pressed for in the past?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend; I accept that it is never easy when a project like this comes through a constituency, and I respect the constructive way in which he has approached this on behalf of his constituents. I know he and his constituents feel strongly about it. I can give him an assurance in each of those areas. As he knows, I have been to his constituency and looked at the impact of the route and can confirm that Yarnfield Lane will remain open. I can also confirm that we are looking again at the tunnel issue and how we best deal with the issue of properties, as he discussed. I will continue to have discussions with him and seek to do the best we can for his constituents, whom I know do not welcome this development, necessary though it is for the country as a whole.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement today. Certainty about the route and the timetable for progressing the project is essential if businesses are to have the confidence to invest and create jobs in the region served by HS2. But, as he acknowledged, decisions also present huge challenges for those communities most affected, and HS2 Ltd has rightly been criticised for the way it dealt with communities on phase 1, so what specific action has he taken to ensure improved engagement and address the need to respond promptly, effectively and sensitively to community concerns?

Chris Grayling: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for the project as a whole. I accept her criticism; I met the HS2 leadership team this week and expressed my concern that that should change. I am absolutely clear that as we go through the process of the hybrid Bill for phase 2a, and the further process for phase 2b, I expect HS2 to do the right thing by the affected communities. I invite any Member of the House to come and see me or the Minister responsible if they feel that that is not happening, and we will seek to ensure that it does.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not wish to embarrass an hon. Member by naming the person, but one hon. Member in the Chamber is standing and seeking to catch my eye despite having just arrived, 21 minutes after the statement began, which is, to put it mildly, a tad cheeky.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. He has confirmed that there will be a major construction site just inside the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). There are no exits to the M6 in that area, between Stone and Crewe, so the A525, which runs through my constituency—and particularly the village of Woore—will be affected. Does he have any idea at this stage of the volume of material that will be transported to the construction site, first by rail and laterally by cross-roads such as the A525?

Chris Grayling: One of the advantages of the site is that it adjoins the west coast main line, and I expect as much as is practical to be delivered and taken away by rail. There certainly will be a road impact, however, as we move towards the construction phase. As we go through the hybrid Bill process, we will discuss that in detail with the Members of Parliament representing the affected constituencies, and I am open to asking Highways England to look at any local amelioration measures that could be put in place to ensure the least possible trouble to the local communities.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I am afraid that the Secretary of State's statement will provoke deep anger among my constituents, not just because of the local impact on them but because they believe, as I do, that this is the wrong choice for jobs, for regeneration, for connectivity and indeed for the ambitions of HS2 for South Yorkshire. I want to ask him two questions in that context. First, the consultation came back 15:1 against the M18 route, so why did he ignore it? Secondly, can he honestly say that this is a better choice for Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham—towns that need to benefit from HS2?

Chris Grayling: I know how strongly the right hon. Gentleman feels about this—he and I have spoken about it—and I give him my personal assurance that I have considered the matter very carefully. The truth is that, when it comes to consultations, there are strong views against an option when it affects a particular community. There is no doubt about that at all. I have considered the regeneration issues around Meadowhall as compared with the current route, and I have considered the engineering challenge of building a large station in the Meadowhall corridor. I have also been mindful of the potential benefits of the direct connection between Sheffield Midland and Leeds for northern powerhouse rail. My judgment, after much consideration and listening to the advice of the HS2 leadership team, is that this is the best option. I accept that the right hon. Gentleman will not agree with my decision, but I give him my personal assurance that I have not taken it lightly. I have listened to what he and others have said and given the matter careful thought. He will disagree with me, but I want him to believe that this was a sincerely taken decision.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): In Broxtowe, many people support HS2—rightly, in my view—because we know that it will bring jobs and growth to the east midlands hub at Toton sidings. People in Trowell will be delighted that the rural scheme for compensation has been extended, and I really do thank the Secretary of State for that decision. However, there will not be the support for the scheme that there should be because of the proposed 60-foot viaduct through the village. Will he give an undertaking that he will look at that again? If he changes his mind about that, the scheme will have widespread support throughout the whole of Broxtowe.

Chris Grayling: As the hybrid Bill goes through its consideration in this House, there will be have to be debates about such issues, and I know that my right hon. Friend and the petitioners will make that point clearly to the Committee. The High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Act 2017 was modified in places in Committee, and it will be open to those who can win an argument with the Committee to secure change.

I also express my thanks to my right hon. Friend for the constructive way in which she has approached the discussions. She is right to say that the regeneration of the Toton site will make a real difference to the east midlands. It is a huge waste at the moment, and I hope to see the project breathe life back into it.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred to the “good news”. This is not good news at all for people in Mexborough and various other places because of the vanity project idea of a station in Sheffield, which has resulted in the spur going straight through the middle of the Bolsover constituency. It is not good news in Newton, where 50 homes are likely to be affected. It is not good news at McArthurGlen in Ashfield, where they were going to increase the number of jobs by 1,000, which has now gone down the pan because of this new route—the so-called HS2 spur. The only decent news is for firms like Carillion, which has been involved in blacklisting. It is almost a mirror image of the current Tory party.

Chris Grayling: I know that the hon. Gentleman feels strongly about this project, which does affect his constituents. I have been clear in saying that it is not

possible to build a project like this without affecting someone—whatever route we chose. In fact, if we had chosen the Meadowhall route instead of the M18 route, more properties would have been demolished. The reality is that we have to take decisions and ensure that we treat the people affected decently. I know that the hon. Gentleman will not agree with me or us about this project, but I assure him that we will seek to treat his constituents fairly.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): When I predicted in 2013 that the cost of HS2 would balloon to £100 billion, I was wrong. It is clear that the project will end up costing the nation an awful lot more than that. Does the Secretary of State share my constituents' concern? They would absolutely expect a Labour Government to wilfully and neglectfully waste taxpayers' money, but they despair at seeing a Conservative Government do exactly that with this project.

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend also feels strongly about this project, but I remind him that HS2's purpose is to deliver additional capacity in our transport system. It will create the opportunity to double the number of peak-time seats into Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham, and there will be a huge increase into London Euston. It will provide the opportunity for more freight to move off the roads and on to rail. That is what this is all about.

I have heard a lot over the past 24 hours about numbers. The project has a budget of £55.7 billion. This country has a decent track record of late of delivering projects on time and on budget, and I am confident that that is what will happen this time. As far as I can see, those who appear to be telling a different story have no involvement in the project and little direct knowledge of it.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that he has once again dismissed proposals for cut and over or other adjustments to the route around Normanton? For all the effort and energy that he has put into looking at alternatives for south Yorkshire, he has not looked at alternatives for West Yorkshire. We have no station between Sheffield and Leeds, and many people will see the costs of the development, but not the benefits. In Normanton, for example, despite being less than 20 minutes from Leeds, we have only one train an hour and will not benefit from any of the shift in capacity that he has talked about. Is he not concerned that his approach to HS2, because of its focus on cities, not on any of the links to towns, will only widen the serious gap between cities and towns in this country, which is becoming even more serious than the divide between north and south?

Chris Grayling: The first thing to say is that we have taken a lot of care to try to put mitigation measures in place, and the movement of the depot from Crofton is a case in point. I have looked to try to change the configuration of the route around Barnburgh, and I have been up there myself to look at the locations. I am sure that the right hon. Lady will make further representations to the Committee that considers the Bill. If she looks at the challenges facing the rail network in the north, she will see that it is not about the lines that have lots of stations; it is about the fact that the links between our major cities are caught up by slow trains.

A fast train from Leeds to Manchester across the Pennines is not possible because of all the stations in between, and councils and representatives in the north have been calling for better, faster links between our northern cities, and this project will do that job between Sheffield and Leeds. One reason why I am attracted to the link between Sheffield city centre and Leeds city centre is to provide fast connections between the two.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con) *rose*—

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Tatton or Shipley? Esther McVey.

Ms McVey: Good choice, Mr Speaker.

I appreciate that the Secretary of State is seeking to be decisive, but my constituents in Tatton are deeply concerned by what they hear in the media. Will he ensure that my constituents, and I as their representative in Parliament, will be fully involved in the decisions that will hugely affect them, and that he and High Speed 2 will not ride roughshod over their legitimate concerns?

Chris Grayling: This is my first opportunity to welcome my right hon. Friend back to the House. I am delighted to see her, and she will know that, of all the constituencies in the country apart from my own, I know hers well. I used to live there, and I understand the impact on local communities. I give her an assurance that we will do everything we can to be sensitive to the concerns and needs of those communities. As I said earlier, such a project cannot be delivered without it impacting on some people. I know the route through her constituency very precisely, and I can assure her that I will continue to work with her to make sure we minimise the impacts to the maximum degree we can.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Between 2013 and 2016, a station at Sheffield Meadowhall was preferred by HS2. Sir David Higgins told me at an MP consultation meeting a few months ago that the station did not go ahead because there was no consensus on Sheffield City Council to build it. The Secretary of State will have seen today's publication of the consultation on the M1/M18 route that goes through three of my villages, which was 15:1 against—a lot of people support Meadowhall. Why do we spend money on consultations if that is the case?

The Shimmer estate at Mexborough was mentioned earlier, and it is estimated that quite a number of houses there will have to come down. On the Broadlands estate at Bramley in my constituency—the estate I live on—at least 81 houses are within 100 metres of HS2, and on the other side is the M18 motorway. The route will be devastating for the constituency, yet HS2 always denies the number of houses that will be affected.

Secretary of State, if HS2 is saying that fewer houses will be affected on the Meadowhall route—I defended that route, which goes through my constituency, too—it is not the truth. I put it in Sir David Higgins's hands months ago, and he still will not give me a figure for what would happen at Meadowhall.

Chris Grayling: We worked through the decision between the two routes very carefully. It is the case that more houses would be demolished on the Meadowhall route than on the M18 route, but the key point is that I have

[Chris Grayling]

taken careful advice from the team working on this, and I have considered the different options. The towns and cities to the west of south Yorkshire prefer one route and the towns and cities to the east of south Yorkshire prefer another. We have tried to take a balanced decision based on what we think is in the best interests of the country. I have given an assurance to the people affected, and I echo it to the right hon. Gentleman's constituents, that we will seek to do the right thing by them. I understand that a project like this is difficult. We need to take decisions in the interest of the country, and we then need to do everything we can to look after those affected.

Philip Davies: There are many people, including in Yorkshire, who think that HS2 is a huge waste of money that could be better spent on infrastructure projects elsewhere in the region. He was bullish about the total figure that HS2 will cost. Will he therefore put a cap on the cost to make sure it does not overrun in the way some people think? At what point does he think HS2 will become too expensive? Or does he support this project whatever its ultimate cost?

Chris Grayling: As the Treasury is paying the bill—

Mrs Gillan: Taxpayers are.

Chris Grayling: The taxpayers are paying the bill, but believe me the Treasury keeps a pretty careful watch on public spending and I have no doubt that it will be keeping a very weather eye on those costs, as will all the various bodies that look at public procurement projects and public construction projects. We have a good recent track record in delivering major projects on time and on budget—people have only to look at Crossrail to see that. We should be self-confident as a nation and say that we can do this. Why would it be the case that other countries can deliver projects such as this and for us to think we cannot—I think we can.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The strength of HS2 is about expanding the capacity of the rail network as a whole, so will the Secretary of State give me an absolute assurance that Liverpool will be directly connected to a new high-speed line and also to Northern Powerhouse Rail?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady knows, Liverpool is one of the cities that will be served from the start by HS2 trains. When we have finished the Golborne link, I expect that in the end to become part of the connection that becomes Northern Powerhouse Rail, but I am waiting for Transport for the North to bring forward its detailed proposals. My view is that Liverpool will benefit enormously through reduced journey times, but I also expect it to be part of Northern Powerhouse Rail. As she knows, I know the city well and I am keen to make sure it benefits from the investment we are putting in.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Although I welcome the clarity that today's announcement brings to residents of Long Eaton, Sandiacre and Stanton Gate in my constituency, and the extension of the rural service to the south of Long Eaton, some of my constituents who

have lived in their homes for 40 years or more are being offered only two thirds of the value of their homes and cannot afford to buy another home. As HS2 will be of great benefit to the whole nation, does my right hon. Friend agree that nobody should be worse off as a result of it?

Chris Grayling: I do agree, and I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and to the people of Long Eaton; as she knows, we have had a long discussion about whether we should have a high-level embankment or a low-level one, and I hope the solution we have reached is one that her community will support. I am clear that I do not want people to lose out as a result of this, and I extend to the House the request that Members should come to tell me if there are any places where there is a danger of that happening.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Both Scotland and Northern Ireland have been awarded 100% Barnett consequentials from HS2, whereas Wales has had a 0% rating. With independent experts predicting a £100 billion or more cost for HS2, does the Secretary of State not recognise the inherent injustice of denying Wales its fair share?

Chris Grayling: If Members look at what we are doing now, they will see that we are in the process of modernising the signalling on the north Wales line. I am very clear that one beneficiary of the construction of HS2 will be north Wales, which will suddenly have significant additional capacity for services to London, Birmingham and elsewhere. This investment benefits everyone, by freeing up the capacity to deliver the services that they want.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): May I say to the Secretary of State that my constituents in Wimboldsley and Winsford will be devastated by this decision? As he has found an extra £750 million, which has been identified by the TerraConsult report as being needed to build over the salt plains of Cheshire, will he confirm that the environmental impact assessment will consider salt subsidence, which is hugely prevalent in this area, and that he will also dedicate £750 million towards the mitigation that will be needed in respect of the effects of raising the height of HS2 throughout the constituency?

Chris Grayling: We will attempt to make sure that we deliver mitigations where we can. It is worth saying that one question that has been raised is about the cost of this route relative to what counterparts in other European countries would spend, but we are, up and down this route, spending additional money on mitigations that other countries perhaps would not necessarily spend. That is an important part of finding the right balance between investment in infrastructure and trying to do the right thing by the communities affected. I know the concerns my hon. Friend has raised and I assure her that I will continue to work with her and her communities. The environmental assessment must look at these issues and of course when the Bill comes before this House the Committee concerned will also look at them. She and I will carry on working carefully together to make sure we deliver the right outcome—the best possible outcome—for her constituency, which will undoubtedly have parts that do not like what we are doing.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The original justification for the Hoo Green to Bamfurlong spur was the siting of a stock depot at Golborne. The Secretary of State has confirmed today that that will be moved to Crewe and that he will develop the Crewe hub. The costs for that part of the line have been repeatedly questioned and the devastation it will cause to the two villages of Culcheth and Hollins Green in my constituency has not been taken into account in any economic assessment. Does he accept that this spur is now the whitest of white elephants and yet another example of the concentration of HS2 on big cities and the neglect of its effect on towns?

Chris Grayling: No, I do not, because the Golborne link is an important part of ensuring good connectivity for Preston, Lancaster, Carlisle and Scotland. If we are to deliver better connectivity to Scotland, we need the Golborne link so that the trains can use that route to reduce journey times as much as possible. I am afraid that I do not accept the hon. Lady's point. I understand the reluctance in parts of her constituency to have this piece of the line developed. We will obviously do the right thing by the people affected, but this is an important part of delivering connectivity to the northern part of the country that would not otherwise happen in the same way.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is already well aware of my constituents and my concerns over the route over the Ingestre salt marsh, but will he also consider putting some tunnelling back into the route through my constituency? The only bit of tunnelling that was there has now been removed, yet there are plenty of kilometres that could be tunnelled to avoid the impact on my constituents in Hopton, Marston and other places, including the Staffordshire showground. Will he also consider the impact on transport links across the region as the route in my constituency cuts across the A34, the M6, the A51 and several other A roads that are important for both regional and national infrastructure?

Chris Grayling: On the latter point, I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that we cannot end up with principal routes cut off. The environmental work we are talking about and the hybrid Bill Committee will consider the issues he mentions. I am happy to carry on talking to him about those options, but now, with the Committee, my hon. Friend and others have the opportunity to make the case to parliamentary colleagues about changes that might be necessary. That worked for the phase 1 Bill and the Committee will no doubt give careful thought to what he has discussed in the context of the phase 2 Bill. I will happily keep talking to him about his concerns.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might remember that I have been a consistent opponent of the project for a very long time. It was £20 billion as a Labour project, then it became a Conservative project and would cost £40 billion, and I was told that I was irresponsible for saying that it would reach £60 billion. It is very clear from the article in *The Sunday Times* only this Sunday that it will cost £100 billion and beyond. I believe that people who elected me and who vote for my party believe that that sort of national treasure should be invested in public services and the

national health service, not in a technology—I hope that he will listen to this—that by 2033 will be as out of date as the canals were by the time the railways arrived.

Chris Grayling: If we roll the clock back 30 years, we were being told that about the rail network, and large chunks of it were closed. I now have hon. Members from all over the place saying, “Can we reopen it?” I am afraid that I do not accept the argument that in 10 or 15 years' time the railways will be redundant. If we are going to maintain a balance between our roads and rail system for transport around the country, we will need investment in both. That is what this is all about. I would simply say to the hon. Gentleman that I accept his view, but I thought the stuff I read in *The Sunday Times* yesterday about cost was absolute nonsense, coming from somebody with no involvement in the project.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Lichfield has been blighted twice by HS2, first by phase 1 and now by phase 2a. Farms are facing devastation in my constituency, with quarries being planned for them under phase 2a. Will the Secretary of State confirm that they can appeal through a petition? His predecessor said that the whole rationale for HS2 was congestion, but is it not the case that most of the congestion is south of Birmingham? I do not believe that phase 2a and phase 2b are necessary. It would save this nation money and I can tell the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is on the Front Bench, that this legislation certainly will not have my support when it comes to a vote.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend talks about congestion; he should see the communications that I receive from people in Manchester and Leeds saying, “Our trains and railway lines are full; we need more capacity.” And, for example, our new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), is keen to see additional services from Stoke to Birmingham. If we are to have new capacity to deliver new services, we need a bigger network; that is what this is all about. I am absolutely clear that people will have the right to petition and to express their views to the Committee; that is the right and proper process to follow.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will have heard the concerns from across the House about the costs of this contract and the companies involved in the consortium, including Carillion, which has made its profits from the frankly over-inflated rates of return on private finance products. Can he confirm that the contract has been awarded under the auspices of the Private Finance 2 pipeline? Under whatever auspices it has been awarded, will he commit to publishing the guidance that his Department used to undertake the value-for-money assessment for this contract?

Chris Grayling: I can give the hon. Lady an absolute assurance that when it comes to letting contracts, we are not taking the same disastrous approach to private finance as the Labour party did, which led to the huge deficits that brought parts of our national health service into a state of financial chaos. We follow a value-for-money approach that is vetted by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the National Audit Office. These are value-for-money public contracts to deliver an essential project for the nation.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, the man in the cream suit: Mr Alec Shelbrooke.

Alec Shelbrooke: Bringing some brightness to this late hour.

May I say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the jobs bonanza that will come with moving the depot to Stourton is hugely welcome to Leeds, the Aire valley and my constituents? On the conversation that I had with the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and on the tunnelling that will take place under Woodlesford, has the Secretary of State given consideration to the site on which the depot will sit? Has he considered putting all the tunnelling equipment and the spoil on brownfield land, so as to minimise the disruption to my villages of Woodlesford and Oulton, and the traffic around them, during construction?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion that I will pass on to the HS2 team. I am very glad that he supports this alternative site; I think it is the right one, and that people further south will welcome the decision. I have sought, having visited all the route, ways of minimising the impact, but as I said earlier, there are inevitably consequences of a project on this scale.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): May I ask the Secretary of State for a clarification and about a point of omission? On the clarification, he referred to the electrification of the line north of Sheffield to Leeds. Will he confirm that the cost of that is provided for in the decision? Paragraph 2.7.62 of the Department's report talks about the possibility of bimodal trains operating north of Sheffield if the line is not electrified. On the omission, the biggest challenge to his decision is the lack of capacity at Sheffield Midland station. His departmental officials have confirmed that there is capacity for only two trains an hour, yet the proposal is for two HS2 trains from Sheffield to London, two from Leeds to Birmingham through Sheffield, and hopefully more trains from Sheffield to Manchester as part of Northern Powerhouse Rail. How will he deal with that lack of capacity? Where is the money coming from?

Chris Grayling: As we get towards the opening of this part of the route in 2033, we will have to make sure that the necessary capacity is available, but as the hon. Gentleman knows, this is the route that Sheffield City Council has argued for. I have accepted that argument. We will have an electrified route that links HS2 and Leeds via Sheffield; that is really important.

Mr Speaker: Andrew Percy.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker; again, a good choice. I am a huge supporter of HS2; it is absolutely needed for the north of England, as is HS3. However, as the Secretary of State knows, my preference has been for the Sheffield Meadowhall option, which would carry more regeneration benefits for south Yorkshire and the Humber. Given that that has been ruled out, when will we get a decision on the parkway station and its location, and how will we ensure that the rest of south Yorkshire outside Sheffield, and the Humber, benefit from this investment?

Chris Grayling: We are doing the work on the parkway station at the moment, and I am interested in getting the views of my hon. Friend and others on how that might best work. Regarding his constituency, I am waiting for Transport for the North to come forward with its proposals about how to create the connectivity that is in Humberside in the rest of Yorkshire. That is the essential part of the process.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State please confirm to my constituents in Crewe and Nantwich that the hub will be situated at the current Crewe station? Will he also confirm how many stops there will be? Crewe will welcome this if Crewe and the workers in Crewe will benefit from the station, but we need to know that we are getting the right number of stops and that the hub will be in the centre of our town.

Chris Grayling: The answer is that I expect the Crewe hub to be at the current Crewe station. There is huge potential there to develop a much better centre, a much better station and much better capacity around the station. Service patterns will be sorted out in the future, but I expect there to be a regular service, and much better connections to north Wales and elsewhere.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Simon Hoare.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I stand as Hobson's choice, I think, Mr Speaker.

Huskisson and his predecessors will have heard many of the concerns about the Victorian railway network as proposed about this village, that village or the other. He and his colleagues wisely proceeded, and the benefits of economic growth and job creation from the Victorian rail network were very clear. Will my right hon. Friend reflect on the important statement made by the shadow Secretary of State? Notwithstanding the parliamentary arithmetic, he provided the support of the official Opposition for this project, understanding and realising the important economic benefits that the proposal brings to the whole United Kingdom. That is to be underscored and welcomed at any time, but particularly in a post-Brexit environment.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right. In the event that I am still Transport Secretary when the first train runs, I do not plan to emulate Mr Huskisson by standing on the track in front of the train as it arrives.

I am grateful for the cross-party support. I know that individual Members on both sides of the House have constituency problems or principled concerns about the project, but the fact is that the project was proposed by both parties back at the end of the last decade. It was first put on the table by the last Labour Government and has commanded cross-party support. I hope that will continue because both parties understand the benefits the project can bring to the whole country. I hope we can work together to ensure that we deliver this Bill, the next one and the whole project. I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for the support he has given to it.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State has indicated that the project will generate jobs throughout the region, 60% of which will be in small

and medium-sized enterprises. What practical measures are being given to small contractors in other regions—I am being a bit parochial—such as Northern Ireland? What opportunities could exist for them in such a project?

Chris Grayling: I have been very clear to HS2 and to our contractors that I expect them to work with small and emerging British companies, to develop apprenticeship programmes and to do the right thing by all our futures. That is an essential part of the project, which is an investment not just in our infrastructure but in our skills base. That skills base resides not just within the apprentices who will be working on the project, but in the small businesses that supply it. I want those small businesses to come from every part of the United Kingdom.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked a great deal about my great city of Stoke-on-Trent, but he said in his statement that the service pattern “could” support an HS2 service to my city. Can he guarantee that we will retain our two fast trains to London per hour, as well as any potential classic-compatible trains?

Chris Grayling: Let me be very clear—indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) has already been lobbying me hard on this—that Stoke-on-Trent will be served by HS2 services and will see additional services connecting to other parts of the region as a result of the development. I see the future of the train service in Stoke-on-Trent as very bright. People in that great city will have access to more services as a result of the investment.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): In Chesterfield, we stand ready to take advantage of the opportunity created by the jobs at the new Staveley depot, which we welcome. We also very much welcome the suggestion that there will be a stop at Chesterfield. Will the Secretary of State build on the good news for us in Chesterfield by confirming that there will be stops at Chesterfield? The wording of the Bill is somewhat ambiguous. Will the project also necessitate the electrification of the midland main line south of Sheffield to Chesterfield and beyond?

Chris Grayling: I can confirm that Chesterfield will have a service on HS2. I can also confirm that the HS2 route through Chesterfield and Sheffield to Leeds will have to be electrified so those trains can run through to Leeds. I also think that when Northern Powerhouse Rail is developed, the route north of Sheffield will become a very important part of it.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): At a line-of-route briefing last week with MPs from Yorkshire and the midlands and me, I was dismayed to see that the HS2 chief executive officer, Sir David Higgins, roundly dismissed all the genuine concerns about lack of engagement and the failure of project staff to empathise with residents. In fact, when I raised the issue of Wells House Road in my constituency, he said it should have been bulldozed at the start. I have heard what the Secretary of State has said to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and others, so could he urgently step in and act as Relate, if necessary, to help repair what looks like a complete breakdown in relations between my constituents and HS2?

Chris Grayling: I cannot comment on the original individual conversations. I simply repeat the point I made earlier that my door and the Minister’s door will be open to any Member from any part of this House who is concerned that their constituents are not being treated properly as part of this project.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome the focus of the statement on the Crewe hub and its importance to the wider area of Cheshire and the north-west, but may I press the Secretary of State on some details? In the statement, he talks about the importance of HS2 to the whole country, but he also talks about the Crewe hub requiring national and local government to work together, which suggests that we in Cheshire will have to make a contribution that other parts of the country will not. Since this is such an important part of the economic development plans of Cheshire, the wider north-west and the cross-border area, will he confirm that he will not be asking local authorities to contribute, because of the benefit the hub will bring to my area?

Chris Grayling: The Crewe station site has the potential to be much more than just a station. There is a big regeneration opportunity for Crewe around that site, and it goes far beyond the provision of rail access. Inevitably, that needs to be something we work with the local community and local authorities on. I am very excited about the potential for Crewe station: if we look at the redundant land, particularly to the west, we see huge capacity for a massive and really important redevelopment project for the whole town of Crewe.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that, in May 2015, HS2 Ltd decided that there was no credible business case for extending a dedicated high-speed rail link north of Manchester to Glasgow. Given the announcement today, will he consider the merits of extending a dedicated high-speed rail link to Glasgow, given that a classic-compatible train without tilting capability will actually increase journey times between Manchester and Glasgow? That is unacceptable.

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, our goal is to work to deliver that three-hour journey time we talked about, and that has the effect of bringing high-speed rail to Scotland. We have to use taxpayers’ money wisely, and we have to find the right balance in this project, but I want this project to work for Scotland as well, and I will do everything I can to make sure that happens.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that local authorities in north Wales have been very supportive of HS2, but please can he assure my constituents that there will be good train links between the Crewe hub and the Wrexham area, because that is very important for us all?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely expect that to be the case. Of course, the benefit of taking the current express trains off the main line is that it provides the opportunity for better services from north Wales to other parts of the country, so those services in north Wales are one of the potential real beneficiaries of this.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I start by saying to the Minister—*[Interruption.]* I have not even got there yet. The Minister may feel the need to hand out party political trinkets to the new hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who is not in his place. In doing so, he does not cause a problem for me or my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), but he undermines the good work done by Sara Williams and the Staffordshire chamber of commerce, who have been lobbying on this matter for a number of years—long before any of us were elected to this place, and that belittles the Minister in this place this evening.

The Secretary of State has said that there “could be” support for having HS2 in Stoke-on-Trent. That is not a commitment that my constituents can base any real decisions on. Could he confirm that, as was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, the number of fast trains running from Stoke-on-Trent to London—London, and not another part of the region—will not be diminished by this announcement? Could he also confirm that capacity for freight transport on the west coast main line will not be diminished through making space for classic-compatible trains? As the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) asked, could the Secretary of State make it clear that the pain that Staffordshire feels will have economic gains, because without that he will struggle to get our support in the vote?

Chris Grayling: I met my hon. Friend the new Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) today to talk about the need to make sure that there is an HS2 service for Stoke-on-Trent, and I have given him that commitment. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members may chunter, but I remind them that my hon. Friend has been the transport spokesman for the ruling group on Stoke-on-Trent City Council, so he is eminently well qualified to make this case, and is already doing a first-rate job as representative of the Stoke-on-Trent South constituency. I have been pleased to give him a commitment about the services for Stoke. I am also pleased to give the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) a commitment that the whole point about HS2 is that it frees up capacity for these extra freight services and extra local passenger services. That is one of the reasons we are doing it.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for confirming in his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) that the midland main line will be electrified, but we have been waiting for as long as I can remember for that to happen, and led up the garden path on numerous occasions. Will he therefore, for the record, give us a date when the midland main line south of Sheffield through into London will be electrified?

Chris Grayling: We are talking about the ability to run an electric train from London, up HS2, around the route into Sheffield Midland, and back up to Leeds. I have given a very clear commitment that that will be the case. As I have said in this House before, the next stage of electrification of the midland main line is currently under way. I have also said that my big priority is to deliver for the people on that line the service improvements they want as quickly as possible, and that is what I am seeking to do.

Acid Attacks

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

11.22 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this, as it turns out, extremely timely debate to discuss our response to the rapid rise in the number of acid attacks. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place.

Last month in Newham, Jameel Mukhtar and his cousin Resham Khan, a student, were attacked with a corrosive liquid while sitting in a car on the way to marking her 21st birthday. They were left with severe burns, and injuries described by the Metropolitan police as life-changing. A 24-year-old suspect has been charged. There was a wave of revulsion across our borough after that attack, with many residents, particularly women, questioning whether it was safe any longer for them to walk down the street. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who is in her place, attended a vigil for the victims organised by Stand Up To Racism, along with the mayor of Newham, attended by more than 200 people. There was strong support for Government action to tackle the rise of acid violence. A petition calling for a licensing scheme for acid sales has attracted more than 360,000 signatures.

I want to press the Minister for two specific changes to the law: first, that carrying acid should be an offence in exactly the same way as carrying a knife is an offence; and secondly, that there should be a requirement to have a licence to purchase sulphuric acid.

I warmly welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement yesterday of a review of the law and criminal justice response to acid attacks. I am pleased that she has undertaken to review the sentencing guidelines, as I called for last week.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, which comes at an extremely appropriate time. My constituent, Adele Bellis, was the subject of a horrific acid attack. She has shown tremendous strength and courage in the way she has rebuilt her life. In Adele’s view, clearer and tougher sentencing guidelines are needed. It must never be forgotten that those who are victims of acid attacks carry a life sentence. Does he agree that it is right that the issue of sentencing is included in the Government’s review?

Stephen Timms: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman and his constituent. Katie Piper, an acid attack survivor and founder of the Katie Piper Foundation, which supports victims, has said:

“Tougher sentencing would surely act as a deterrent to further attacks”,

and I agree with her. We need greater consistency in sentencing as well.

I hope that the review announced by the Home Secretary will be carried out quickly, because we need urgent action, and I hope that in her response to the debate, the Minister will be able to tell us about the envisaged timescale.

I want to say a little more about the two specific points that I raised earlier. First, carrying acid without good reason should be a criminal offence, as carrying a knife is already. Of course, there are wholly legitimate reasons for obtaining acid, as there are for obtaining a knife, but we do not want people carrying them around the streets.

The Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 has created a minimum custodial sentence for those aged 16 and over convicted of a second or subsequent offence of possession of a knife or offensive weapon. The sentence for an offender aged 18 or above is at least six months imprisonment when convicted, and that for 16 and 17 year olds is a detention order of at least four months. Comparable sentences for possession of acid could combat the apparently growing idea that it is a safe weapon for gang members and others wanting to commit violent crimes.

Secondly, a licence should be required for the purchase of sulphuric acid. Some have complained that that would be an excessive, knee-jerk response, but actually it has been proposed by the British Retail Consortium, whose members have agreed voluntarily to stop selling sulphuric acid products. It points out that, under the Control of Poisons and Explosive Precursor Regulations 2015—which amended the Poisons Act 1972 and were intended to restrict supply of items that could be used to cause an explosion—sulphuric acid is already covered but under the lesser “reportable substance” category. Its proposal is that sulphuric acid should be promoted to the “regulated substance” category so that a licence would be required to purchase it. Regulated substances require an explosives precursors and poisons licence. A member of the public needs to show a valid licence and associated photo identification before making a purchase.

The proposal is supported not only by members of the British Retail Consortium, but by the Association of Convenience Stores, which says:

“We support legislative action under the Explosive Precursors Regulations 2014; for example, reclassifying sulphuric acid from Reportable Substance to Regulated Substance. This will provide retailers clarity and certainty on their obligations for products which contain sulphuric acid.”

It is significant that the shopkeepers themselves are asking for that chance.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The whole country has rightly been shocked by the recent acid attacks in London and the increased number of such attacks throughout the country. Many constituents have contacted me because they are horrified by what has been happening and feel that action needs to be taken. It is also important that we acknowledge the bravery of Resham Khan and her cousin, Jameel Mukhtar, in coming forward and sharing their experience so that we can discuss it here. I hope that the Minister will listen to both of my right hon. Friend’s suggestions, which I fully support.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and agree with him on both points. I particularly endorse his point about the revulsion and wave of anxiety created by this spate of attacks. As well as shop sales, the issue of online sales will need to be addressed, including of substances other than sulphuric acid.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to control online sales, because if substances cannot be bought at the corner

shop sales will move online. Does he agree that, despite the practical difficulties in extending regulations to the online sphere, it is no less important that we tackle that if we are to restrict the supply of corrosive chemicals to illegitimate users?

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is clear that part of the problem is online, and it will increasingly be so. That does need to be addressed as part of this initiative.

I have one other request for an outcome to the review that the Home Secretary has announced. In March, I asked a written question about the number of acid attacks in each of the last five years, and I was dismayed to receive this reply from the Minister’s predecessor:

“The Home Office does not collect data on the number of acid attacks.”

Since then, through freedom of information requests, a good deal of data have been published. I hope that the Minister will be able to assure us that in future, given the increasing concern about the matter, her Department will collect and publish data on acid attacks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I sought the right hon. Gentleman’s permission to intervene. He has clearly outlined the acid attacks that take place in the United Kingdom. He and I are both members of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, and he will know about the acid attacks perpetrated against people across the world. Is tonight an opportunity to raise awareness of acid attacks on persecuted Christians in Iran, where human rights and equality issues for women are also a concern? I know he has an interest in that issue.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman has found the opportunity and raised precisely that issue. He is absolutely right: the use of acid, in all sorts of ways, is quite widespread around the world. As far as I can tell, the incidents that we are increasingly seeing in the UK are not like those to which he refers in Iran or elsewhere in the world. It appears that gangs in the UK have decided that acid offers a less risky way of committing their violent crimes than other weapons. Of course, it is entirely appropriate for him to draw attention to this horrific problem elsewhere in the world.

Acid attacks are an abhorrent form of violence. Acid, or a similarly corrosive substance, is thrown on to the victim’s body—usually their face—in order permanently to disfigure, to maim or sometimes to blind them. Acid causes the skin and flesh to melt, often exposing and dissolving even the bones below. I pay tribute to James Berry, the former Member for Kingston and Surbiton, who talked a good deal about this. He made the point, rightly:

“For the victim, an acid attack is far worse than the life sentence the perpetrator plainly deserves.”

There has been a very worrying increase in acid violence. Last year, there were 451 such crimes in London, up from 261 in the previous year. In 2016, almost a third of them, I am sad to say, were carried out in the borough of Newham, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham and I represent. Since 2010 there have been almost 450 acid attacks in the borough. Constituents have suggested to me that there may well have been others that have not been reported, and so are not included in those statistics.

[*Stephen Timms*]

I have referred to the worry that many feel since the attack on the cousins in Newham. One resident said:

“I live in Newham and residents in the borough are feeling really unsecure and unsafe. My family and kids are so scared that they think twice before going out.”

Another wrote in an email:

“Having lived in Newham for 25 years I find myself considering whether I should move out of the area to ensure safety for my family.”

Metropolitan police statistics show only two attacks in the last year, and they are classified as hate crimes. There was the one on the cousins and another one somewhere else. The much greater worry, contrary to what some people think, is that acid is becoming a preferred weapon of gangs carrying out robberies. It is easy to obtain, cheap and hard to trace back to the perpetrator. While it is relatively hard to obtain a gun and knives are more tightly restricted, criminals seem to have concluded that acid is a less risky weapon when committing violent crimes. What we need to do, as I am sure the Minister will agree, is make acid more risky than it has been seen to be over the past two or three years.

I hope that the review will also look at how to equip the first responders to the victims of acid attacks. A number of people have contacted me ahead of this debate to pass on advice about how to treat victims most effectively at the scene of an attack and how to equip paramedics and first aiders who go to their aid.

A report compiled in 2014 by J. Sagar Associates of India for Acid Survivors Trust International points to what it sees as two main flaws in the UK’s approach to acid violence. The first is that weak restrictions on sales of acid are failing to prevent its acquisition for criminal use. The second is the inconsistent approaches taken by the courts in considering mitigating factors when sentencing those found guilty of acid attacks. Jaf Shah, executive director of Acid Survivors Trust International, advocates an age restriction of 18 on purchases and the prevention of cash sales to aid tracking, so that sales can be made only with a credit card. He suggests research to establish whether substances could be made less concentrated, more viscous or possibly even crystalline so that they are less easy to use to cause harm.

Licensing and restrictions have the support of very many of my constituents and of the local authority. Newham Council has backed tougher licensing conditions and robust codes of practice on the sale of noxious substances, as well as measures to raise awareness of the issue among those who work with young people.

To conclude, I welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement over the weekend of a review. I hope that the Minister is able to tell us something about the timescale for completing that work. I urge on her as outcomes of the review those two specific changes to the law: first, that carrying acid should be an offence, just as carrying a knife is; and, secondly, that there should be a requirement on those who purchase sulphuric acid to have a licence permitting them to do so. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

11.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I genuinely thank the hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for

bringing this very important debate before the House today. How timely it is. I also thank colleagues who have made important contributions this evening. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the tone he set for us this evening. I agree with every point he made.

Even before the terrible events of last Thursday, which left five people injured, one with life-changing injuries, it was clear that the use of acids and other corrosives to attack people is a growing threat that must be addressed with urgency. Violence of any kind is unacceptable, but I think there is something particularly troubling about these kinds of attack. Corrosive substances cause severe burns and serious tissue damage. All too frequently, victims’ lives are altered forever. Nobody should have to go through this kind of mental and physical trauma. We have heard from victims who say that the injuries have deeply affected their sense of self. The challenge of returning to a normal life can sometimes feel almost insurmountable.

Sadly, these disturbing acts of violence are not new. The use of acids goes back centuries. However, the increase in incidents in this country is undoubtedly very worrying. In April, there was the attack in a Hackney nightclub, which left a number of people with severe burns and serious eye injuries, and we have heard the hon. Gentleman speak so eloquently and movingly this evening about the two cousins who were attacked in his constituency. It is vital that we do all we can to prevent these horrendous attacks from happening. We must not let those behind such attacks spread fear through society.

The law in this area is already strong, with acid attackers facing up to a life sentence in prison in certain cases. Meanwhile, suspicious transactions involving sulphuric acid must be reported to the police. However, it is vital to ensure that we are doing everything possible to tackle this emerging threat. Earlier this month, the Home Office held a joint event with the National Police Chiefs Council, which I attended. The meeting brought together law enforcement, Government, retailers, the NHS, experts and local policing to discuss the acid attacks and build up a better evidence picture. The hon. Gentleman made the important point that we must have better data on the scale of the threat to help us to understand how we will tackle it. Last October, with the help of the National Police Chiefs Council, we got more information from the police, which we have put into the public domain—it is on the Home Office website. We will be repeating that exercise, so that we collect data more regularly and have a much better understanding of the scale of the threat.

That meeting provided the basis for the action plan to tackle acid attacks that was announced by the Home Secretary on Sunday. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] I have been passed a useful note telling me that he has been made a right hon. Gentleman—it is richly deserved—so I apologise for not picking that up earlier. The action plan will include a wide-ranging review of the law enforcement and criminal justice response, existing legislation, access to harmful products and the support offered to victims. I want to reassure the right hon. Gentleman and all colleagues here tonight that the points he has raised are being actively considered as part of that review.

Lyn Brown: I genuinely thank the Minister for putting the review in motion. I welcome the breadth of the urgent issues that the Government have indicated will

be under consideration, but I wonder whether she thinks it is a good time for the review to take a broader look at the safety of the changes made to the sale of substances such as sulphuric acid by the Deregulation Act 2015. I understand that the experts who sat on the former Poisons Board, who had real expertise in this area, had serious concerns and favoured alternative reforms.

Sarah Newton: As I say, this is a wide-ranging review. We are definitely looking at the Poisons Act 1972, and I will make sure the hon. Lady's point is taken into careful consideration. We are looking at the Crown Prosecution Service's guidance to prosecutors, to ensure that acid and other corrosive substances can be classed as dangerous weapons. In addition, we will look again at the Poisons Act and whether more can be done to cover these harmful substances.

We will make sure that those who commit these terrible crimes feel the full force of the law. We will seek to ensure that everyone working in the criminal justice system, from police officers to prosecutors, has the powers they need severely to punish those who commit these appalling crimes. As the Home Secretary has said, life sentences must not be reserved for acid attack survivors. Further work will also take place with retailers, including online, to agree measures to restrict sales of acid and other corrosive substances. Victim support needs to be at the very heart of our response. We need to make sure that victims get the support they need, now and in the years ahead.

We are working on this with great urgency. We are about to go into recess, but I want to reassure the right hon. Member for East Ham that when Parliament gets back in September I will make sure that I update colleagues who are interested and seek an opportunity to update the House on the considerable progress that we expect to be able to make over the summer.

Stephen Timms rose—

Sarah Newton: I have probably got a few seconds left, so I want to reassure the right hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* I have obviously misjudged the amount of time I have, so I am happy to give way.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister, and I look forward to the update in September, as, I am sure, do other Members. Is she able to tell us when she expects the review announced by the Home Secretary to conclude? When does she expect the final outcomes to be announced?

Sarah Newton: As I have said, we have already started work. We put a fair amount of it in motion last year during the build-up to last week's meeting. I cannot commit myself tonight to a particular time by which we will complete the work. As I think everyone will understand, it is so wide ranging that, while some elements will be relatively easy to bring to fruition, others will require a longer period. Some may require changes in legislation, in which case we will seek the earliest possible legislative opportunity. I can absolutely commit myself, however, to the seriousness with which we are taking this issue, and to the urgency, the vigour, and the resources that we are bringing to bear in the Home Office to co-ordinate a whole-system response. We are working with partners both outside and inside Parliament. Different agencies need to come together.

These are horrendous crimes, and I am very much aware of the fear that is spreading, not only in London but in other parts of the country. There is simply no place in 21st-century Britain for such hate-filled, utterly devastating attacks, and we will do absolutely everything we can to prevent them.

Question put and agreed to.

11.46 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 July 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[*MR SPEAKER in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

MIDDLE LEVEL BILL

Motion made,

That the promoters of the Middle Level Bill, which originated in this House in the previous Session on 24 January 2017, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Tuesday 5 September.

RICHMOND BURGAGE PASTURES BILL [Lords]

Lords message (11 July) relating to the Bill considered.
Resolved,

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON BILL [Lords]

Lords message (11 July) relating to the Bill considered.
Resolved,

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

MOUNCHER INVESTIGATION REPORT

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Paper, entitled Mouncher Investigation Report, dated 18 July 2017.—(*Graham Stuart.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—
Wages

1. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What fiscal steps he is taking to help increase the average level of wages paid by employers. [900546]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The key thing that we can do to increase productivity is to ensure that we invest in education and improve skills. We have more people going to university and doing apprenticeships, and we are investing in our rail and roads.

Martyn Day: Unlike the Scottish Government, the UK Government voted for the public sector pay cut. Moreover, this Government's so-called national living wage is not based on the cost of living. What new measures will this Government bring in to provide people with a wage that they can live on?

Elizabeth Truss: We have made sure that basic rate taxpayers are paying £1,000 less tax by raising the personal allowance. We are also introducing the national living wage, bringing in a £1,400 rise in take-home pay for the lowest earners.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The important thing for ensuring that people get a wage from an employer is to make sure that they have a job. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury welcome the record fall in unemployment to a 42-year low, particularly among young people, which is giving them much better opportunities in Britain than those available in most other European Union countries?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is right. We now have the lowest levels of unemployment since 1975, thanks to the economic policies pursued by this Government to improve skills and infrastructure, and to take sensible decisions on public sector pay.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): As has been clearly demonstrated, the Government are celebrating falling unemployment without any critical analysis of the nature of the employment being created. Many residents of North West Durham are in work that exacerbates their financial difficulties because their pay is low, their terms and conditions are poor, and they do not have regular hours. Will the Minister update the House on the number of people who are currently working on zero-hours contracts? Will she also accept that looking at employment figures in a vacuum does nothing to help us to understand whether people are any more secure or any better off?

Elizabeth Truss: Fewer than 3% of people are on zero-hours contracts and, as Matthew Taylor recognised, many people want that flexibility so that they can combine their work with the other things in their lives. We need to ensure that people have the skills to get better jobs in the future, and that is exactly what this Government are investing in.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury join me in welcoming the fact that 75% of the 2.8 million jobs created since 2010 are full-time jobs, and that zero-hours contracts account for just 3% of all jobs?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Is it not amazing that not one Labour Member has welcomed the fact that we have the lowest unemployment since 1975, or that we have lower youth unemployment? In fact, the Opposition model their policies on countries such as Greece, which has exceptionally high youth unemployment, and they take for granted the progress that we have made over the past seven years.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): First, let me welcome any increase in jobs in our society, but when it comes to commenting on wages, does not the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that it ill becomes a multi-millionaire earning £145,000 a year, admittedly in a temporary job, and living in two grace-and-favour properties at the taxpayer's expense to attack public sector workers—our hospital cleaners, nurses, teachers and firefighters—as being “overpaid”? Public sector

workers' pay has fallen on average by £4,000 in the first six years of this Government. One in five NHS staff are forced to take a second job, and teachers are facing a further cut to their salaries of £3,000 by 2020. Does she not think that the Chancellor should just do the right thing and apologise?

Elizabeth Truss: Yet again, the right hon. Gentleman is not giving the House the full picture of what is happening with public sector wages. Last year, teachers' pay went up by 3.3%. More than half of nurses and other NHS workers saw a pay rise of over 3%, and the armed services saw a pay rise of 2.4%. The cleaner he talked about was employed not by the public sector but by Serco. The right hon. Gentleman needs to get his facts right.

John McDonnell: That is true—the Government privatised the jobs.

I note that the Chief Secretary did not dispute the fact that the Chancellor said that staff were overpaid. The Chancellor tried to justify his attack on public sector workers by trying the classic divide and rule between public and private sector workers, citing public sector pensions. Is the Chief Secretary aware that those supposedly generous pensions across several professions pay on average the princely sum of just £5,000 a year, and that low pay has forced many public sector workers to opt out of their pension scheme? Eleven per cent. of those in the NHS have opted out; if that figure continues to rise, the whole scheme could be undermined. Will the Chief Secretary recognise the damage that the Chancellor is causing and lift the pay cap so that public sector staff can have some hope of a fair wage settlement—and, yes, a decent future pension?

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Gentleman still has not acknowledged the truth of the figures that I cited—the 3% pay rise for over half of nurses and the 3.3% rise for teachers. He simply will not look at the facts. The reality is that public sector workers are, rightly, paid in line with the private sector to allow the public and private sectors to flourish so that we can create wealth in this country. In addition, public sector workers have a 10% premium on their wages in pension contributions, and that is in the Office for Budget Responsibility report.

National Debt

2. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the national debt. [900547]

6. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the national debt. [900551]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Debt has climbed steadily since 2009 as a result of the high levels of deficit. Since 2010, we have reduced the deficit by three quarters, so national debt will now peak at just under 90% of GDP this year. As the OBR's "Fiscal risks report" of last week makes clear, that level of debt—a legacy of Labour's recession—leaves us vulnerable to future shocks, which is why the Government have committed to eliminating the deficit and reducing the level of debt as a share of GDP. As a result of the actions taken to bring the public finances back under

control, the OBR now forecasts that debt will start falling next year and will be below 80% of GDP by 2021-22.

James Cartlidge: Those figures are welcome, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that were the Government to pursue a policy of wiping all outstanding student debt, that would cost in excess of £100 billion and cause the national debt to surge? Will he also confirm that the biggest beneficiaries by far would be the top-earning graduates in the country?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He might have added that were anyone to suggest that they were able to do that, they could be accused of practising a deception on the people to whom they were offering that proposal. The cruelty of that would become apparent when it would have to be admitted that the proposal could not possibly be delivered. We face a debt challenge in this country, and we cannot borrow our way out of debt. The Opposition would do well to acknowledge that. Stronger growth and sound public finances are the only sustainable way to deliver better public services, higher real wages and increased living standards.

Michelle Donelan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that last week's OBR study shows that the debt level is 89% of GDP, highlighting that we must continue to be responsible with the public finances to weather any future uncertainty and to ensure that the Wiltshire economy continues to thrive?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right to express concern about the vulnerability created by the high level of debt. As the OBR made clear last week, that debt means that if the economy were to face an external shock, we would not be in a position to respond in the way that we would ideally like. That is why we have to get debt down, and the only way to get debt down is to get the deficit down. That means responsible fiscal policy, not the kind of rubbish we hear from Labour Front Benchers.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Was it not clear from the OBR report last week that it is a hard Brexit that presents the biggest threat to our national finances? Just a 0.1% decrease in productivity could lead, over 50 years, to a 50% increase in the ratio of debt to GDP. If the reports are true that the Chancellor is prepared to champion a longer transition from the single market for the UK, such welcome news might secure a lot of support on both sides of the House.

Mr Hammond: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution. On an issue as important to our nation's future as our exit from the European Union, I welcome any opportunity to build consensus across the House and the nation. He is right to draw attention to what the OBR said. Even a very small decline in our productivity performance would add huge amounts to the debt and would reduce, by significant amounts, our projected growth in GDP. That is why it is so important that we now act responsibly in maintaining fiscal discipline and ensuring that we reduce our debt over time.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): How is the Chancellor's consensus building around the Cabinet table going? Will he update the House on his assessment of the trade

deals that will be done after we leave the single market? He knows that Brexit is going to cause a fiscal shock. Is it true that he has challenged the Secretary of State for International Trade to disprove Treasury calculations that show there is no trade deal we can do after leaving the European Union that will make up for the huge loss of trade that Brexit will create?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is assuming that we will lose trade with the European Union. It is clear to me that, all other things being equal, the ability to enter bilateral trade deals with third countries will be a positive for our economy. Of course, we also want to protect our trade with the European Union. My focus is on ensuring that we get a Brexit deal that protects our existing patterns of trade and commercial engagement with the European Union, as well as, over time, allowing us to explore new opportunities beyond the European Union.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): The Chancellor will be aware that the current cost of Government borrowing is at a historical low, with gilt yields at 1%. Does he agree that, if markets lose confidence in our ability to live within our means, the cost of that borrowing would spiral, costing us billions of pounds? That would mean less to spend on our public services.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right to warn of the danger of a loss of market confidence in UK fiscal policy—I am looking very hard at the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). If markets lose confidence in UK fiscal policy, they will re-price lending to the United Kingdom. We already spend more every year on servicing our debt than on our armed forces and police services together. It would do a huge disservice to taxpayers in this country if we created conditions that would cause the cost of that debt to rise.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): An enfeebled Chancellor has been forced to give a £1 billion bung to the Democratic Unionist party, to cough up £1.3 billion for a schools funding U-turn, to scurry around to find £2 billion to pay for his humiliating national insurance contributions debacle and to bail out his nightmare neighbour’s social care retreat with £2 billion. Why should this House believe a word, a promise, a claim or a target on reducing the debt?

Mr Hammond: I was glad to see the hon. Gentleman smiling by the end of that little rant. I do not know which planet he lives on, but I do not feel particularly enfeebled. I do not know what the Labour Treasury team does all day, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education made it clear in her statement yesterday that she has put extra money into the frontline schools budget by reprioritising the wider education budget and finding efficiencies across her Department. That is the way to do a fiscally prudent protection of our public services.

Peter Dowd: Yes, the Government have taken it off some children and given it to others.

The national debt has risen by £707 billion since 2010 and is rising. It is barely a year since the Chancellor was given the keys to No. 11, and in that time public sector net debt has not been reduced. According to the Office for National Statistics and the OBR, it has increased by

£122 billion. Given that lamentable record, has he been given notice of eviction by the woman in the bunker next door? Perhaps they may leave Downing Street in the same removal van.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will know—I say that, but perhaps he will not—that public sector net debt will continue to grow until the deficit is eliminated. That is a simple arithmetic fact. His Government pushed our deficit up to almost 10% of GDP, and we have spent the past seven years getting it down to 2.4% of GDP. We will carry on getting the deficit down so that this country’s public finances get back into balance. We are a responsible Government, planning for Britain’s future.

Infrastructure: Private Sector Investment

3. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to incentivise private sector investment infrastructure projects in the nations and regions. [900548]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): This Government are committed to supporting private investment, which finances about half our infrastructure. We have a trusted and stable regulatory system, and through the UK guarantees scheme we have supported projects worth more than £4 billion. We are also introducing innovative support such as the digital infrastructure investment fund, which will accelerate the roll-out of the ultrafast network.

Ian C. Lucas: The north Wales Mersey Dee region hosts world-beating businesses such as Kellogg’s, Airbus and JCB, but we need competitive infrastructure in order to ensure that we remain competitive. For that reason, and in the absence of the public sector investment we are crying out for, may we please have the ability to deliver private sector investment? What are the Government going to do to deliver roads and rail?

Andrew Jones: I simply do not recognise what the hon. Gentleman says; investment in our infrastructure is at a record high. We are seeing investment in roads, rail and south-east air capacity—in all modes of transport. The point is how we deliver that investment, and it is a combination of public and private. He is clearly right to champion the requirement for infrastructure in his area and to highlight its impact on the economy, but to say we are not doing anything is just factually wrong.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): One disincentive for the private sector to invest in infrastructure is the delay that sometimes occurs in bringing major projects through to completion and commencement. The private sector is already committed to making a significant contribution to the funding package for Crossrail, but we have been waiting since March for a decision to take it forward. Will the Minister do all he can, across government, to speed up that regional and national infrastructure project?

Andrew Jones: I see significant merits in Crossrail 2, just as I see them in northern powerhouse rail and projects right across our country. I will of course take on board my hon. Friend’s point and relay it to the Transport Secretary.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Private investment thrives on stability, but we have a Cabinet in a state of anarchy when it comes to the terms of our exit from the European Union. Do the Government agree with Labour Members that an early announcement on transitional arrangements is therefore essential? If the Minister does agree with that, will he tell us the Government's position on the latest date such arrangements could be announced—or are we more likely to see a transitional Chancellor than a transitional deal?

Andrew Jones: I am not going to speculate on the negotiations, as that would be way above my pay grade. I just refer the hon. Gentleman to the Chancellor's answer a moment ago on the merits of a Brexit deal that secures our economic future.

Infrastructure: Government Investment

4. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of Government investment in infrastructure since 2010. [900549]

7. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of Government investment in infrastructure since 2010. [900552]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): Infrastructure is at the heart of this Government's economic strategy, and our investments will boost productivity and growth. Since 2010, more than a quarter of a trillion pounds has been invested by the public and private sectors, about 3,000 individual projects have been completed, we have almost completed Crossrail, and more than 4 million homes accessed superfast broadband for the first time.

Vicky Ford: Nearly 100 years ago, the world's first radio broadcast was sent out from Britain—from Chelmsford. Does my hon. Friend agree that the digital infrastructure investment fund will give a massive boost to fibre and superfast broadband so that the UK can continue to lead the world in the digital and communications sectors?

Andrew Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I have just learned something about Chelmsford and its history in the development of our digital and radio infrastructure. The investment will boost Britain's internet, making it more reliable and consistent and easier for people to live and work more flexibly, which will of course boost productivity right across the UK. Fibre is the technology of the future, just as radio was 100 years ago, and this fund will significantly assist small and medium-sized enterprises with capital to roll it out, with both Chelmsford and the UK benefiting.

Mims Davies: Investment and infrastructure projects are absolutely key to keeping our nation moving. As the Minister knows, Chickenhall link road and Botley bypass in my constituency were helped to do just that and to improve the quality of life of my constituents. I welcome road funding through the national productivity investment fund. Will Ministers meet me to discuss the delivery of those projects, which will affect my constituency in Eastleigh?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency and for these projects. I have absolutely no doubt about the importance of them locally. If nothing else, we have met on the subject a number of times, and she is very tenacious. These projects not only open up opportunities for development, but help to relieve the congestion in the heart of her constituency. I will of course ensure that she meets the Transport team as soon as possible to progress those projects.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The electrification of the Great Western Railway between Paddington and Swansea was to provide huge economic benefits for businesses along that line. Unfortunately, the project has now overspent by £1.2 billion, and not a yard of the line has been electrified. What are the Government doing to ensure that projects such as this do not run over and waste taxpayers' money in future?

Andrew Jones: The efficiency in the way that we deliver our infrastructure is a critical consideration when the Government are putting in so much money to transform our infrastructure. The points that the hon. Gentleman makes about Network Rail will have been heard by my hon. Friends in the Transport team, and I will highlight his comments to them.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Last month, the Institute for Government produced a report on infrastructure spending that said that decision makers do not know whether projects deliver value for money. It also believes that Parliament and the public are misinformed. What action are the Chancellor and his Department taking to ensure that future infrastructure spend delivers value for money and that costs do not spiral out of control like they have for Hinkley Point C?

Andrew Jones: I simply highlight the extremely rigorous business case process, which every single project has to go through before it receives approval. The idea that these schemes are not considered is just wrong.

Kirsty Blackman: The Scottish Government have committed to delivering 50,000 affordable homes by 2021. We recognise the calls that are being made by organisations such as Shelter Scotland and Big Issue, which believe in prioritising affordable housing. Why are the UK Government committing to build only 40,000 affordable homes in the same period?

Andrew Jones: Again, that is a question that will have to go to colleagues in another Department. I will make sure that they hear the hon. Lady's comments.

Corporation Tax

5. **Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): What assessment he has made of how to balance the needs of (a) business and (b) the Exchequer in setting the corporation tax rate. [900550]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): This Government believe in a tax regime that is fair and competitive. Since 2010, we have reduced the headline corporation tax rate from 28% to 19%, allowing companies, big and small, to invest in expanding their business, boost wages, create jobs and lower prices. Onshore corporation tax receipts have also increased by over 50% despite the rate being lowered.

Bob Stewart: Does the Minister agree that if we raise corporation tax, it is normally passed on by business to customers, and that if we lower it, we hope that prices will come down?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is important to remember that the burden of corporation tax does not just fall on shareholders. If we were to follow Labour's policy of increasing corporation tax, we would see less investment, lower growth, lower productivity and, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, lower wages and indeed higher prices.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier, the Chancellor acknowledged that productivity is the key to economic growth and eliminating our public sector deficit. When manufacturing businesses invest, they often lose any benefits of corporation tax reduction because of higher business rates. That acts as a disincentive to invest and increase output and productivity. Why does he not cut business rates instead?

Mel Stride: This Government have done a great deal in terms of providing business rate reliefs, which were announced in previous Budgets and are, I think, well known to the House. There will be more to come on that in the Finance Bill.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister tell the House by how much the corporation tax take has gone up since the corporation tax rate was cut?

Mel Stride: This is an important point. As the corporation tax rate has decreased to 19%—it will go down further to 17%—we have seen a 50% increase in the take, which is an amount in the order of £18 billion.

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Most economists prioritise building business confidence and improving infrastructure and skills over cutting corporate tax rates. Is the Minister aware that lowering corporate tax rates now presents the appearance of Britain trying to undercut countries with which we need to agree a decent Brexit deal—at a time when businesses are not confident in the Government's leadership, but are instead “aghast” and “confused” at their approach to Brexit?

Mel Stride: We have seen a huge increase in employment in this country to a record level, and a record drop in unemployment to the lowest level since the mid-1970s. A lot of that has been driven by business. If the hon. Lady is seriously suggesting that the recipe for increasing the confidence of business is putting up its corporation tax to 26%, she has, I am afraid, missed the point.

Economic Growth

8. **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in economic growth. [900553]

13. **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in economic growth. [900558]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Short-term indicators of growth are volatile. Quarterly growth was 0.2% in the first quarter of this year, but this followed strong growth of 0.7% in the quarter before. The underlying economy is robust, thanks to

record employment levels. Although a recent rise in inflation, caused mainly by the depreciation of sterling last year, may temporarily dampen consumer spending—today's inflation figure for June is a little lower at 2.6%—there are signs from surveys of business that export orders and business investment intentions are up.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee on the Treasury, Nicky Morgan.

Nicky Morgan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Would the Chancellor not agree that a growing economy is necessary to pay for our essential public services? The Office for Budget Responsibility's “Fiscal risks report”, which has already been referred to, says that “governments should expect nasty fiscal surprises from time to time”—

I am not referring to the shadow Chancellor there—and “plan accordingly”, but this Government also have to manage the uncertainties posed by Brexit. Should not a responsible Government not worsen uncertainties and risks by the decisions that they take?

Mr Hammond: Let me first congratulate my right hon. Friend; it was remiss of me not to do so in my first answer. I very much welcome her to her role on the Treasury Committee, and I look forward to being grilled or toasted by her, or whatever the correct expression is. She is of course exactly right: the only way to build resilience into the economy is to have strong public finances, and the only way to have a sustainably growing standard of living is to have rising productivity over the medium and long term, and that is what the Government's policy is focused towards.

Andrew Bowie: These are obviously still worrying times for many in north-east Scotland, with the continued low oil price still causing concern, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the strength of the United Kingdom's economy, now the second highest growing in the G7, has enabled this Government to provide over £2.6 billion of support to the industry, securing jobs in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine?

Mr Hammond: Yes. The UK oil and gas sector has made a huge contribution to the UK economy, having paid over £330 billion in total in production taxes to date, and supporting over 300,000 jobs. In the next phase of the life of the North sea basin, as many fields come towards the end of their life, we are working with the industry to ensure that we extract every drop of oil and gas that it is economic to extract, that we enable decommissioning, and enable end-of-life fields to be operated in the most effective way.

17. [900562] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Much of the growth is due to the fact that we are spending more on imports, due to the low cost of the pound. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that our trade in goods deficit has risen by £2.6 billion over the past quarter and now stands at a staggering £34.4 billion. Does not the extra cost of imports have an impact on the cost of our exports and affect our productivity?

Mr Hammond: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know, the short-run effect of a depreciation in sterling would be expected to be a decline in our trade balance performance as we suck in more expensive imports, in sterling terms. But over time the economy will adjust—there are signs that this is happening now—with exporters increasing their output to take advantage of weaker sterling and their greater competitiveness in international markets, and indeed not just exporters, but those who would substitute imported products with domestically produced products, which is often the best way forward for smaller companies.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): One of the ways of reducing the deficit is by increasing economic growth, rather than increasing taxes or reducing spending. What steps is the Chancellor taking to produce economic growth, and how are his efforts being affected by those who continually talk the economy down and predict dire effects from Brexit, even though their predictions to date have been proved wrong?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right; those who talk the economy and its prospects down are not doing the country any favours. It is not about borrowing more or taxing more; it is about growing our economy faster and increasing productivity so that we can have sustainable jobs and economic growth that produces the taxation to support our public services as well as rising living standards for our population.

Youth Unemployment

9. **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing youth unemployment. [900554]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): Youth unemployment is at a record low: 5.1% of 16 to 12-year-olds are unemployed or not in full-time education. That compares with 9.4% in 2009, under the previous Labour Government.

Luke Graham: Although I welcome the record unemployment figures that the Minister has given this morning, youth unemployment is still higher in my constituency and in Scotland than the UK average, so will he work with me and others across the House to encourage more investment in my constituency and in Scotland as a whole?

Stephen Barclay: I will be very happy to work with my hon. Friend, because we recognise that work is the best route out of poverty. Indeed, unemployed households are 13 times more likely to be in relative poverty than those with people in full-time work.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): I understand what the Minister says about less unemployment, but my concern is that this is not just about employment, but about retention. Does he agree that now is the time for hard-working, tax-paying public sector workers to get the pay rise that they have earned, and that he should scrap the cap?

Stephen Barclay: We can see the effects, were we to follow the hon. Lady's policy, by looking at youth unemployment rates elsewhere in Europe. In Greece it is 45.9%, and even in France it is 22%. The best way of addressing poverty is by keeping young people in work.

18. [900563] **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Government investment in Cheltenham's cyber-accelerator since 2015 is now yielding results, with numerous cyber start-ups benefiting from local mentoring from experts at GCHQ. Does my hon. Friend agree that mobilising the UK's sovereign expertise in areas such as cyber boosts jobs for young people and opportunity in places such as Cheltenham?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The GCHQ cyber-accelerator in Cheltenham is part of the Government's £1.9 billion cyber-security strategy. It allows business start-ups to gain access to GCHQ's world-class personnel and expertise, and the accelerator helps these businesses to expand, contributing to jobs and opportunities, including in Cheltenham, and it makes the UK a safer place online. I know that my hon. Friend has worked very hard on this for a considerable period of time. He makes an important point as he speaks up for his constituency, and how it is leading in the UK and across the world.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): How does the Minister expect to reduce youth unemployment, given the further education budget cuts across the country, particularly in Coventry, where the budget has been cut by 27%?

Stephen Barclay: Actually, we are seeing record numbers of people, in particular disadvantaged students, going to university. The situation will not be helped if people are conned with the idea that student debts will be written off.

Mr Speaker: Well, that was a first in this place, certainly during my time in the Chair: I have never known a ministerial swap to take place mid-answer. I assume that it was inadvertent; the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is nothing if not immaculate in his parliamentary manners. I put it down to error. But I hope that the Ministers know their own identities. I would be worried for them if they did not.

Rooftop Solar

10. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What fiscal steps his Department is taking to incentivise businesses to invest in rooftop solar. [900555]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): Immaculate parliamentary manners, but not immaculate parliamentary procedure—sorry about that, Mr Speaker; I thought we had moved on from that question.

Solar is a UK success story. In 2013, solar capacity was expected to reach between 10 and 12 GW by 2020; we now expect Government support to bring forward about 13 GW by then. Feed-in tariffs provide an incentive for businesses to invest in rooftop solar.

Christian Matheson: The sun might be going down on the Chancellor's time at No.11, but it remains an important source of energy and income for 44,000 microgenerators, including schools and hospitals. But since April they have seen their business rates increase by up to 800%, in some cases. Some major deployers of the technology are now pulling out of the

rooftop market. Will the Government reassess the business rate levy paid on rooftop solar, so that we can give real growth to this important environmental sector?

Andrew Jones: The Government are continuing to support the take-up of solar panels through business rates by maintaining the exemption for new installations of solar power generating less than 50 kilowatts of power; of course, we also have all the transitional relief schemes and the cut in business rates announced in the Budget last year, which cost nearly £9 billion. The Government have listened to the voice from solar. We are keen to see progress on solar, and these schemes will help that.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will not the roll-out of solar panels be greatly helped by Brexit, when the very high tariffs imposed on cheaper Chinese photovoltaic cells are removed and we will no longer be protecting the inefficient German industry?

Andrew Jones: I thought my hon. Friend was going to say that the sun may be shining more brightly post-Brexit. We are very keen to see the progress of solar as well as all other renewables. We will have to see what happens with pricing, but the key thing is that we will be supporting solar, as it is a key part of our power mix for the future.

Mr Speaker: There was I thinking that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) was taking an interest in energy saving because he has six children. Apparently not.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Have not the Government actually cut support for solar because, together with new storage technologies, it threatens to become so successful that it would kill off any case for horrendously expensive nuclear?

Andrew Jones: The support for solar comes directly from people's bills. When the costs of installation and generation come down, through efficiencies and economies of scale and production, so should support. We are taking steps to control the cost of support schemes and putting solar on the path to delivery without subsidy.

Tax Avoidance and Evasion

11. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What plans he has to introduce measures to tackle tax avoidance and evasion carried out through non-domiciled status and offshore trusts. [900556]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The UK has effective legislation to tackle avoidance involving offshore structures and we have announced our intention to legislate further, making it harder for non-doms to avoid paying tax on funds withdrawn from trusts. I am also pleased to say that we have been at the forefront of international work that has seen 100 countries commit to exchange financial information automatically.

Catherine West: The Conservative manifesto said that the Government would "take a more proactive approach to transparency". Does the Minister believe that enough is being done to tackle companies that promote tax-avoidance schemes,

or is there still a tendency for the big four accountancy firms to regulate the big four, via the big four, in order to protect the big four?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady asks if enough is being done to clamp down on tax avoidance. I can assure her that it certainly is. Since 2010, we have raised £160 billion by way of clamping down on exactly those behaviours. In the forthcoming Finance Bill there will be further measures to make sure that over the scorecard period we are bringing in between £7 billion and £8 billion in addition, in corporate tax avoidance measures.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that due to steps taken by this Government, the top 1% of people now pay 27% of income tax, and that that is a higher proportion than under the previous Labour Government?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Labour party would constantly have us believe that somehow we are being soft on the wealthy and hard on the less well-off when the precise opposite is true. The top 1% pay over 27% of tax, and the wealthiest 3,000 people in our country pay as much as the poorest 9 million. Under Labour, the poor paid more tax relative to the wealthy, not less. No wonder that under our policies income inequality is at a 30-year low.

Income Tax/National Insurance

12. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of merging income tax and national insurance. [900557]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are committed to simplifying the tax system. In 2015, we asked the Office of Tax Simplification to provide an independent assessment of the alignment of income tax and national insurance contributions. We have already taken action in a number of places highlighted by the report. However, alignment now would cause significant upheaval for millions. Now is not the right time for further reform in this area.

Neil Parish: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new ministerial role. Last year the Office of Tax Simplification said that bringing national insurance and income tax closer together would create a simpler and fairer system for business and taxpayers. As national insurance and income tax revenues go into the same pot, would it not be simpler and clearer to merge the two and have one single income tax?

Mel Stride: As I said, we recognise the value of merging national insurance and income tax where that is practical and achievable, and there are some measures coming up in the Bills in the autumn that will address that in certain circumstances, but to do it right across the piece at this stage is perhaps a long-term aspiration rather than one we will be addressing in the short term.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that as people go into the higher tax threshold they stop paying more national insurance, so would one of the impacts of merging the two be to reveal that the British tax system is not as progressive as people think, and make the case for those with the broadest shoulders to pay more?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman needs to recognise that national insurance and income tax function in different ways and have different roles in the tax system. We have one of the most progressive tax systems in the entire country. If we look at, for example, those earning above—*[Interruption.]* Well, by raising the personal tax allowance we have taken 3 million to 4 million people out of income tax altogether. For those earning over £100,000, where we removed the allowance, that, plus national insurance, means that the marginal rates are up to 62% at that level of income.

Public Sector Pay

14. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of public sector pay since 2010; and if he will make a statement. [900559]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We hugely value the work of public servants—teachers, police and nurses. That is why they are paid in line with the private sector, and, in addition, receive a 10% increment, on average, for their pensions.

Diana Johnson: We all agree that MPs' pay recommendations are decided independently and go through automatically. However, other public sector pay review bodies take into account Treasury submissions but then find that their recommendations are vetoed by Ministers. If it is good enough for Members of Parliament, why is it not good enough for nurses, the armed forces, firefighters and teachers?

Elizabeth Truss: We do take notice of what the independent pay review bodies say. We have just approved the recommendations of the teachers pay review body and of the nurses pay review body. Listening to their recommendations, the pay review body for the NHS said:

“We do not see significant short-term nationwide recruitment and retention issues that are linked to pay.”

We followed that advice and gave the pay accordingly.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Increases in the tax-free personal allowance since 2010 have put £1,000 into the pocket of each basic rate taxpayer, including those who work across the public sector. Will the Chief Secretary continue to help public sector workers to keep the money they earn, through lower taxes?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The worst thing that we could do is to support the Labour party's policies, which would, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, lead to the highest levels of taxation in peacetime history.

19. [900564] **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think the Treasury response today to the questions about the 1% pay cap are profoundly disappointing. This is the single biggest thing ensuring that inflation erodes living standards. It is impoverishing workers, and it is driving up consumer debt. When will the Treasury agree with the Foreign Secretary that the time has come to end this cap?

Elizabeth Truss: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that, in fact, teachers have seen a 3% pay rise, many nurses get progression pay and people in the armed forces get an X-factor supplement that is worth 2.4% a year. Their salaries are in line with private sector salaries. It would be wrong to have a significant differential between the public and private sectors, because we need businesses to thrive in addition to having well-funded public services.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Time is against us, but I want to hear a couple more of the Order Paper questions.

Government Investment in Skills

15. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the effect of Government investment in skills since 2010. [900560]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): Treasury Ministers have engaged on a regular basis with the Secretary of State for Education. We will double spending on apprenticeships over the decade to 2020, allowing 3 million apprenticeship starts in England by 2020 and giving people the best start in their career.

Mrs Badenoch: Since 2010, the substantial increase in apprenticeships has helped many young people into work. Stansted airport in my constituency is a great provider of apprenticeships, and its employment academy placed 700 people into work in the last year alone. Does the Minister agree that apprenticeships have contributed to the record low level of youth unemployment?

Stephen Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, there are 55,000 fewer young people unemployed than there were a year ago, thanks in large part to the investment that this Government are putting into apprenticeships.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that if we are going to do anything about skills or productivity in our country and our communities, we have got to look to local further education colleges? Will he support, with money, resources and leadership, the introduction of a practical maths course to help young people who are waiting in colleges up and down the country, struggling to get apprenticeships? Will he talk to the Education Secretary about doing that, to get these young people on their way?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman will welcome the Government's record investment of £500 million in T-levels, to tackle exactly the issue that he has raised in technical education. The Government's commitment can also be seen in apprenticeships. Whereas under the last Labour Government there were just 280,000 apprenticeship starts, there were more than half a million last year under this Government.

Corporation Tax: Receipts

16. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What effect the reduction in corporation tax rates has had on receipts from that tax. [900561]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Since 2010 the headline corporation tax rate has been cut from 28% to 19%. Despite that, onshore corporation tax receipts have increased by more than 50%, from £36.2 billion in 2010-11 to £55.1 billion in 2016-17.

Jeremy Quin: According to KPMG, we have the second-most competitive tax regime anywhere in the G7. Does my hon. Friend agree that that encourages businesses to locate here and boosts our tax receipts?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The OECD has made it very clear that corporation tax increases are the most harmful tax increases for economic growth. By keeping business taxes down, in 2015-16 we saw a record number of inward investment projects creating more than 1,600 jobs per week.

Topical Questions

T1. [900536] **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My priority is to ensure that the economy remains resilient as we negotiate our exit from the European Union. That means building on this Government's achievements in reducing the deficit by two thirds, delivering record levels of employment and getting unemployment down to the lowest rate since the mid-1970s, while continuing to tackle the long-term challenge of productivity enhancement and making steady progress towards balancing the budget

Mr Wragg: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Raising the personal tax allowance has been a key achievement of this Government. What recent assessment has he made of the number of my Hazel Grove constituents who have benefited from that policy?

Mr Philip Hammond: I agree with my hon. Friend. The UK will have increased the tax-free personal allowance by over 90% compared with 2010, completing a decade of sustained tax cuts for working people. Over 31 million taxpayers will pay less tax in 2017-18, including 3 million taxpayers in the north-west. Since 2010, more than 4 million taxpayers have been taken out of income tax altogether.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Personal contract purchase plans for financing cars have gone up by 394% in the past five years, and the Governor of the Bank of England has said that we are failing to learn the lessons of the past when it comes to easy credit. What action is the Chancellor taking to ensure that lending is affordable and does not pose a risk to the wider economy?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay): May I first congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee? As she will be aware from her Bank of England days, this is a matter for the Financial Policy Committee. Indeed, the FPC noted in its recent report that consumer credit is growing at a

lower rate than it was under the previous Labour Government, but loss rates on lending remain low, as they are at present.

T2. [900537] **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will know from his time in the Foreign Office that one of the great strengths of our great kingdom is the perception of fairness we enjoy around the world. Will he talk a little about fairness in financial transactions, as the hidden taxes imposed by many companies on investment are grossly unfair on those who are saving in pensions for the future?

Stephen Barclay: There is a theme here, because I should congratulate my hon. Friend on his election as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Government are committed to the principles of transparency. He will have noted the recent Financial Conduct Authority report on the asset management market study. Indeed, we are seeing technology—in particular, through FinTech—driving the sort of transparency to which he refers.

T9. [900544] **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on refugees, I am told by refugees that they are desperate to work once they have achieved such status, but are hindered by various fixable problems in the system. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to make it easier for refugees to have bank accounts?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady will be aware that when the Home Office grants refugee status, it includes the biometric residence permit as proof of the holder's right to stay, but I am very happy to discuss with the hon. Lady any further measures that she feels would be helpful.

T3. [900538] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): To promote the drive towards world free trade, will the Chancellor of the Exchequer assure the House that he is absolutely, personally and enthusiastically committed to following our manifesto commitment to leave not just the EU at the end of 2019, but the single market and the customs union?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, I have made it clear on many occasions that when we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, we will also leave the single market and the customs union. Those are matters of legal necessity. My focus is on ensuring that thereafter we put in place the closest and deepest possible partnership with our European neighbours that will allow us to continue the patterns of trade and business, patterns of security co-operation and patterns of educational exchange and scientific and research collaboration that we enjoy now. That is the best way to protect Britain's prosperity.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Unsecured borrowing has rocketed, and lenders warn that default rates on credit cards and other products this summer will be at their highest level at any point since the height of the financial crisis. Instead of simply passing the buck to the Financial Policy Committee, what are the Government going to do in public policy to alleviate the serious risk of a household debt crisis?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman misstates the position. It is an independent responsibility of the Bank of England to address that—*[Interruption.]* It is. It is of course an area where there will always be frequent discussions with the Treasury, but it is a Bank of England matter.

T4. [900539] **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The UK Government have a strong record of supporting Scottish businesses, and the British Business Bank has provided nearly £1.5 million of support to small businesses in East Renfrewshire. However, many businesses in my constituency are disadvantaged compared with competitors and counterparts in England due to the Scottish Government's approach to business rates. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling for the Scottish Government to reverse their decision to double the large business supplement, restore rates parity on both sides of the border and allow Scottish businesses to compete on a level playing field?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): My hon. Friend is entirely right. The large business supplement is a devolved tax matter and the supplement in Scotland is double that in England. The consequences were best summed up by Liz Cameron, the chief executive officer of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce:

“Here in Scotland, we must ensure that we are seen to be the best place in the UK to do business and that will require a fundamental reassessment by the Scottish Government of its tax policies.”

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Chancellor will know from his own officials' analysis that the difference between staying in the European economic area and a Canadian-type deal, which is essentially what the Government are now aiming for, is a hit to GDP of £16 billion, which is equivalent to a 4p rise in the basic rate of income tax. How can it not be right to stay in the EEA, at least for transition?

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Lady is now asking a different question. The Prime Minister has been very clear that Britain is a very large economy in relation to our European neighbours and we would expect to have a bespoke arrangement with the European Union as our long-term future status quo, and indeed a bespoke arrangement for any interim period that is agreed. The hon. Lady is quite right that as we go forward with this process, we need to deliver on our commitment to leave the European, but to do so in a way that protects the British economy, protects British jobs and protects Britain's prosperity, and that is what we will do.

T5. [900540] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend, for the benefit of the House, confirm the cost to the economy of cancelling student debt, say whether that is affordable and explain what effect it would have on the work we have done to reduce the deficit?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): As the Labour party admits, cancelling student debt would cost £100 billion. The Opposition made that reckless promise, which would see the debt soar, during the election campaign, but now they say it is just an “ambition”. Are they going to say sorry to the people

they made their promise to, and are they going to say sorry to the British public for threatening to bankrupt the economy?

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Further to the questions asked by my hon. Friends the Members for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), will the Chancellor confirm, as he failed to do before, that the cost to us of Brexit will be as described by my hon. Friends some moments ago?

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Lady, I think, knows that there can be no definitive answer to that question. We do not yet know what the form of our agreement with the European Union will be and we do not yet know what arrangements will be in place for any kind of interim or transition period, so she is speculating. What I can tell her is that the Government are 100% focused on getting the best deal for Britain and delivering it in a way that protects British business and British jobs.

T6. [900541] **Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Several of my Beckenham constituents have suggested that the winter fuel allowance might be a taxable benefit. Is that being considered?

Mel Stride: We have no plans to tax the winter fuel allowance.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): One of the best boosts to economic growth is Government infrastructure spending, so will the Chancellor look down the back of the sofa where he found the £1 billion for the deal with the Democratic Unionist party and find more change to sign the Edinburgh city growth deal?

Mr Philip Hammond: At the autumn statement, I made a conscious decision to borrow an additional £23 billion for investment in economically productive infrastructure projects—a conscious decision to address one of the challenges we face in improving Britain's productivity. The Government will continue to combine a prudent fiscal approach with investment in our future through productivity-raising measures.

T7. [900542] **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The new Conservative Mayor of the Tees Valley, Ben Houchen, is setting up the first mayoral development corporation outside London on the former SSI site in Redcar. The regeneration of the site and the attraction of inward investment are obviously vital. Will my hon. Friend work with me and the Mayor to deliver the best outcome for the site and the local economy?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones): The South Tees Site Company is currently undertaking ground investigations to assess the levels of any contamination on the SSI site. The mayoral development corporation is leading on the development of plans for the future of the site. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend, the Mayor of the Tees Valley and others to promote the economy of the area.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the Budget, the Chancellor promised a consultation on business rates, but we have not yet seen that. Businesses

in York are really struggling and some are leaving the city because of the astronomical business rates. When will we have that consultation—what is the date?

Mr Philip Hammond: We have to deal with two issues. One is the process by which we uprate business rates, and we all saw earlier this year that long periods followed by dramatic revision are not good for anyone. They cause disruption to business, so we are looking at how we can smooth the process. Secondly, we need to look more broadly at the way in which we address the perceived unfairness that companies that operate in bricks and mortar are effectively treated differently from companies that do not. That is not an easy challenge, because many of the digital companies operate internationally and it requires international co-operation.

The consultation that the hon. Lady asks for will be issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government and I will pass on to the Secretary of State her concerns about the date.

T8. [900543] **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Noting that the unemployment rate is at a 42-year low, may I inquire of my right hon. Friend what the effect has been on average personal incomes for workers in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock—and, indeed, the rest of the UK—of increases in the minimum wage and the national living wage?

Elizabeth Truss: The increase in the national living wage to £7.50 an hour means that a full-time worker on minimum wages has had a pay rise of £2,800 since 2010. More than 150,000 low-wage workers in Scotland are benefiting from that extra money.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Tyne and Wear Metro is in urgent need of investment if we are to see the new rolling stock rolled out by 2021. What conversations has the Chancellor had with the Transport Secretary about funding that vital piece of infrastructure for the north-east?

Mr Philip Hammond: As the hon. Lady may know, I take a clear view about the confidentiality of conversations between Cabinet Ministers—[Laughter.] While I have had many conversations with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, I make it a rule that it is for departmental Secretaries of State to make announcements when appropriate.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that lowering corporation tax to 19% has incentivised business investment in North Warwickshire and Bedworth by companies such as Aldi, which has its headquarters there, and throughout the UK?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right, and he is rightly a champion of business in his constituency. There is no doubt that lower taxes create wealth and in turn pay for the public services that we all desire—contrary to the party opposite. I share one exchange with the House—when my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) asked the shadow Chief Secretary if he was

“aware that tax as a percentage of GDP is going to be at its highest level since Harold Wilson was Prime Minister?”,

his response was:

“Let me put it like this: if we had a Labour Government, the percentage would be even higher.”—[Official Report, 18 April 2017, Vol. 624, c. 579.]

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The TUC estimates that nurses, firefighters and border guards face losing more than £2,500 in real terms by 2020. For ambulance drivers, who earn significantly below the UK average wage, the figure is more than £1,800. Does the Minister agree that it is about time that we gave hard-working public sector workers the pay rise they deserve?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady should be aware that more than half of nurses and NHS workers saw a 3% pay rise last year. She needs to check her facts.

T10. [900545] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Last night, I met a major financial institution. Does my hon. Friend agree that for London to retain its place as the leading financial centre we need a regulatory regime based on mutual recognition and an early-agreed transitional phase to provide certainty?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend rightly champions that key sector which provides £71 billion of tax to fund public services. It is in the interests of the UK and the EU to avoid fragmentation because that will increase costs, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that we are ambitious, in terms of the trade deal that we reach with the EU, to come to an arrangement that delivers regulatory equivalence.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Does the Chancellor accept that the confusion and conflicting ambitions of the Government’s policy on Brexit are already having an impact on investment? In the long run, that will be massively damaging to the economic prospects of this country.

Mr Philip Hammond: No, I do not accept that. However, I readily agree with the hon. Gentleman that, as I have said many times in the Chamber, the process of negotiating our exit from the European Union and then executing that exit is bound to create uncertainty, and uncertainty is always unwelcomed by business. The challenge for us is to secure as much certainty as possible as early as possible for business, and that is our focus.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am advised that the point of order flows from Treasury questions, and I will therefore take it, but if it turns out to be just a continuation of the debate, I will be pretty intolerant of it; so I hope it is pithy and something approaching a genuine point of order.

Kirsty Blackman: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I very much appreciate your taking my point of order.

During Treasury questions, I asked the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), a question that specifically concerned an announcement in the Chancellor’s autumn statement. He did not answer it, saying that it

was not within the remit of his Department. May I ask for your guidance, Mr Speaker? Whom should I ask questions about Treasury documents, if not Treasury Ministers?

Mr Speaker: If memory serves me correctly, the Minister indicated that he would pass the matter on to the relevant departmental Minister. These are matters not of precise fact but of judgment, and also of some discretion so far as the Minister answering questions is concerned. Of course, when the Chancellor delivers either his Budget or an autumn statement, he inevitably makes announcements that concern expenditure covering

all sorts of different Government Departments. If subsequently a Treasury Minister is asked a question relating to expenditure in a particular area to which, because of his or her natural self-effacement and modesty—in the case of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough—he feels that another Minister would be better equipped to provide an informative answer, there is nothing disorderly about that. It may be disquieting for the hon. Lady, but that is not the same as the Minister's behaviour being disorderly. I hope the hon. Lady will accept that for now—and I see that the Minister is beaming with contentment, although it has to be said that there is nothing new there.

Free Childcare

12.42 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) (*Urgent Question*) To ask the Secretary of State for Education to make a statement on the process for applying for free childcare hours from September 2017.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Robert Goodwill): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the urgent question. It gives me an opportunity to highlight the Government's determination to invest a record amount in childcare, supporting early education and helping parents financially. That amount will total £6 billion annually by 2020.

My Department is committed to ensuring that three and four-year-olds have access to free early education. All parents, regardless of income and employment status, are entitled to 15 hours of free early education for their three and four-year-olds, and for parents who are working we are providing access to an additional 15 hours of free childcare from September 2017. Parents who want to take up 30 hours of free childcare can apply through the digital childcare service. They can access the application via the Childcare Choices website, which provides information on all the Government's childcare offers. The application process takes about 20 minutes. I have recently had a walk-through of the service myself; it is straightforward, and the format will be very familiar to parents who have used other Government digital services.

The childcare service is a complex IT system, which checks parents' eligibility in real time by interfacing with other Government IT systems. The vast majority of parents will receive an instant eligibility response, but there will be a delay for some parents whose eligibility is not immediately clear—for example, for some self-employed people. The service has also experienced technical issues which have meant that it has been unavailable to parents on a small number of occasions. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which has developed the service, has been working hard to resolve those issues, and as a result the customer experience has improved.

The application has been open to the parents of under-fours since 21 April, and today my Treasury colleagues will make a written ministerial statement informing the House that the service has been further rolled out to the parents of under-fives, the so-called summer babies. Parents whose application is successful will receive a 30 hours eligibility code to take to their provider in order to claim their childcare place. As of today, more than 145,000 codes have been generated from successful applications. That is an increase of almost 5,000 codes since Friday 14 July and an increase of almost 25,000 since Friday 7 July. Increasing numbers of parents are successfully applying. It is great news that so many families will benefit from 30 hours in September because, as we have seen from our early implementer and early roll-out areas, the support can make a positive difference to the lives of hard-working families.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and to subsequent questioners, I must make it clear that

I granted the urgent question because of the narrow and specific focus on the issue of the accessibility, or otherwise, of the Government's website. This is not an occasion for a general debate about childcare policy. If Members want just—this is not unknown in politics—to score political points and to ask rhetorical questions, that is not what this exchange is about. It will run for 20 minutes and it will focus on the particular issue that the hon. Lady identified in her application.

Layla Moran: I thank the Minister for his response, but as some may be reading in their end-of-year reports due this week, "Good effort; just not good enough." The process for applying for free childcare is confusing both for parents and nurseries. As one parent said to me:

"getting the code was the most complicated process that I have ever endured. I would imagine that many parents would give up!"

They explained that

"you get passed from pillar to post between different areas of the website, each asking you for a different password, sent to you by SMS or email. Is this really necessary?"

As Members will attest, setting up two-factor authentication on our phones was difficult enough, and we have a well-resourced IT department. Who is helping the parents at home who are juggling this with jobs and caring for their young children? As a result, parents have not been able to open accounts to pay their nursery, playgroup or pre-school. Even some of the providers, particularly in the voluntary sector, cannot register.

The Government's roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare is welcome, but only if it is of high quality and if parents can access it readily. Therefore, I ask the Minister: why is the Department for Education website still sending parents a holding response when they finally submit an online application? How long is the Department taking to confirm eligibility? What proportion of children eligible for the free childcare have been able to access it? Moreover, with the end of the school term rapidly approaching, how can nurseries plan for the upcoming year if parents cannot provide them with their voucher details? What support can the Government provide to nurseries to plan and budget effectively for an as-yet-unknown number of children who will be joining them on 1 September? Finally, what will the Government do to review the matter and the accessibility of the online registration process so that this does not happen again next year?

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady asks some reasonable questions. I reassure her that, at the moment, 2,850 parents are registering per weekday and we are on track to reach, we think, about 200,000 by the end of the month. I encourage parents to get on with it. We do not want everyone to leave it until 11.30 pm on 31 August. As I said, the vast majority of cases are processed fairly simply, but because we need to check that the person meets the eligibility criteria on income, sometimes there are complications. I have mentioned self-employed people and people who change jobs, so occasionally it is more complex. I reassure the hon. Lady on the point about people who cannot use the online system. We have an offline process for any parents who experience persistent technical difficulties. I encourage anyone who has those problems to take up the matter.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his new appointment. What resources are being given to those from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure that they have access to the 30 hours of free childcare?

Mr Goodwill: Obviously, disadvantaged children are eligible for free childcare at the age of two and that continues for 15 hours through to the age of four. That additional funding and that additional 15 hours are for people in work. Some of those people may be on low incomes. A person who is working 16 hours at the national minimum wage qualifies. I have already mentioned that there is an offline system for people who may have problems and who cannot use the online system because of sight or other difficulties. However, the evidence so far is that the applications are coming in. They are now being presented to their providers and they will come back to us via the local authorities. May I make the point that some local authorities have been a bit tardy in passing the codes back to us? If anyone goes back over the recess, do ask them whether they are getting on with it, because that is another area where we need to see some improvement.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. What a shame it is that, when we could be weeks away from a great breakthrough for providers, parents and most importantly children, we are instead discussing a policy that is riddled with holes—and, my word, are there questions to answer!

Just yesterday the Minister's colleagues in the Treasury admitted in response to one of my written questions:

“It is not possible to provide a definitive number of applications not completed due to technical issues”.

Will the Minister give us his estimate of just how many parents suffered these “technical issues”? What steps are being put in place to fix the system, and what guarantees can he make to parents that, as the August deadline approaches, the system will work for them?

How many calls has the hotline received? Of the 30,000 people who applied and were rejected, what were the reasons for those rejections and can the Minister guarantee that those rejections were correct and not due to system errors? What about the parents on zero-hours contracts who are simply unable to guarantee that they will work over the minimum weekly hours: how many of them will be refused the childcare they were promised?

Finally, as the Minister will be aware, there are huge problems with this offer and there are many other questions to answer. As the Minister likes to refer my written questions to those at the national provider, Childcare Works, with implementation weeks away will he accept my request to meet them as soon as possible?

Mr Goodwill: In welcoming the hon. Lady to her place, I have to say she is very much not a glass half full person. This is a great childcare offer. Yesterday morning, I was in the city of York, one of the pilot areas, meeting providers and parents who were benefiting, and I heard from people who said, “This is a great offer. It means no longer do I have to pass my husband in the hallway as I go out to my evening job and he comes in from his daytime job.” We heard of eight people in York who are now accessing employment because of the childcare being available. So it is a great offer and I am very proud

that it has been delivered. We have ironed out the glitches in the software, and people are registering; as I have said, we are on track for 200,000.

The hon. Lady asked how many people we expect to register, and the short answer is that we do not know, because it is a voluntary system to which people will opt in. Also, of course, there will be three tranches. It will not all happen with a big bang in September; there will be another tranche of parents who qualify in January and another tranche after Easter. It is great news for working families—something this Government are delivering on.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the amount of my time that was taken, the amount of time that my constituent had to give up, and indeed the amount of time given by the technical support people in the Minister’s Department, all as a consequence of the fact that my constituent had an apostrophe in her name, can the Minister speculate why on earth we were not told that there was a manual workaround?

Mr Goodwill: I have made that clear today. There have been a number of outages, several of which were to fix some of the glitches to which my right hon. Friend draws attention. The most recent one was due to a power supply issue between 6 pm and 10.20 pm last night, 17 July. That has now been fixed and the system is up and running again.

Mr Speaker: Very reassuring.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this urgent question, and given that this is largely a devolved matter, I will be brief.

Ensuring affordable, flexible and secure childcare is one of the best ways to narrow the gender pay gap, by helping parents back to work when it suits them, and also to prepare children best for school. In Scotland, the Scottish Government are trialling childcare funding following the child by investing £1 million to make sure that, when we expand free childcare to 1,140 hours, parents have the choice to decide what is best for them and for their children. We are also going further than the UK Government by helping the most vulnerable two-year-olds in Scotland, to ensure that all children can have the best start in life. That is quite a contrast to the issues being faced by parents south of the border. If disadvantaged parents are not able to apply for childcare by the deadline due to the Minister’s website problems, how will they will be supported thereafter?

Mr Goodwill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the party election broadcast on behalf of the Scottish National party. The website is up and running and, as I have said, 2,850 parents per day are registering and getting their confirmation codes; we encourage people to do so as soon as possible, rather than leave it to the last minute. Indeed, I am very pleased that we are now on track. Some 143,000 valid 30 hour contract codes have been generated and we are on track to reach our target of 200,000 by the end of next month.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): As a mother with three children, I have been through a raft of different child support schemes. There were none initially, which is why I welcome the fact that this support is in

place; we must not forget that. Obviously, it is essential that parents have confidence that they can apply. Will the Minister reassure those who are struggling—not just parents but nurseries; I understand the difficulties—that we will help them? I have met people from many nurseries in my constituency. We are relying on them to deliver this service, so can we have assurances that it will work?

Mr Goodwill: That is why we ran the scheme through 12 development areas. Indeed, 15,000 children are already enjoying it, including those in the families I met in York yesterday. It really is a good offer. Of course there is flexibility in the system: one can use a childminder, a pre-school playgroup, or a formalised nursery setting and mix and match the hours. So it is a great opportunity. Indeed, the hours can be spread over the holidays; currently, 30 hours a week for 38 weeks are available, but that can be spread over the year for those who wish to cover the holidays as well.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that 120,000 codes have now been issued and that he expects that to rise to 200,000 by the end of the month, but given that the Government's own estimate of the number of eligible families is in excess of 390,000, by my maths that means that only just over a quarter of those eligible have now got their codes. Given that we had warning after warning from providers that the scheme would be unaffordable to them and that they worried about there being sufficient places, how are they supposed to plan for September when only just over a quarter of families have registered for this scheme to date?

Mr Goodwill: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is making a fundamental error. The total number will come in three tranches: one in September, one in January and one after Easter, as children reach the eligible age. This will be an ongoing system, and therefore—*[Interruption.]* The children starting in September need to apply by the end of August. There is no rush for parents whose children turn three in time for starting in January. We are on track to deliver 200,000 by 1 September. Subsequent tranches of children will come in after Christmas and Easter.

A number of concerns have been raised about providers being able to deliver for the funding we have provided, and we have put additional funding in. I am pleased to say that in the city of York, where I was yesterday, despite the fact that some of the private sector providers expressed disquiet, 100% of providers are delivering on the scheme. Indeed, in contrast to the numbers projected, we have 117% delivery.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Dorset was one of the pilot areas for 30 hours of free childcare. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the performance of those pilots, specifically in relation to the online system?

Mr Goodwill: Those in the pilots did not participate in the online system we have in place now; there was an all manually based system. I can assure the House, however, that 4,000 parents were involved in testing the service and valuable lessons have been learned from Dorset regarding the operation of the service and provision of free places.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): In light of these additional difficulties in bringing in what is a very welcome policy, what additional support will the Government give to nurseries that are preparing to deliver the scheme? We need to make sure that the resources are there for delivery.

Mr Goodwill: As I have said, we increased the funding to allow for it to be delivered; an average funding of £4.94 for each hour is now being provided. That was in direct response to the concerns of some providers about the level of funding, but I have to say that even the providers who said that the funding was not sufficient have now managed to deliver at this price. Indeed, the nursery I visited yesterday said it had surplus places before the pilot scheme was introduced, but is now full, which is great news for it in terms of its overall funding.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Small, community-led pre-schools, such as the one in Hedge End in my constituency, are not necessarily groups, and they are worried about the process for them and for local parents. Will my hon. Friend tell us what the Government have done to ensure that all early-years providers are able to deliver the 30 hours for those families and to retain the positivity around this programme?

Mr Goodwill: Parents have a choice about where to deploy their 30 hours of care. It can be with a childminder or in a nursery school, but it can also be with one of the many excellent voluntary sector providers, including pre-school playgroups. My wife used to run a pre-school playgroup, so I have been briefed on this issue. It is vital that people have a choice about where to send their children that suits their lifestyle, their work and the logistics of getting their children to that setting.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that I was Chair of the then Children, Schools and Families Select Committee when the Labour Government set us on this path, and I am sure that most Labour Members will welcome this good news. I have a vested interest in this subject, having 10 grandchildren and, I hope, more to come. However, many people in my constituency are struggling with access and are not very computer literate. Will he consider enabling the National Day Nurseries Association, which is based in my constituency, and the other marvellous children's charities to help by being the interlocutors between the Government and our constituents?

Mr Goodwill: In the short time that I have had this portfolio, I have met a number of organisations and I particularly look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman's own locally based organisations. That is very much on my bucket list. We certainly wish to engage as widely as possible with representatives of providers and of the families who are benefiting from this programme. Also, I have to say that we could not deliver this £6 billion a year of funding without the successful economy that this Conservative Government are delivering.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): As the parent of a one-year-old, I am very grateful for this scheme as I find my way through the challenges of parenthood. I am sure that many others will feel the same. Will the Minister

[Robert Courts]

please tell the House what testing was carried out prior to the launch of the system, and how many parents were involved?

Mr Goodwill: As I have said, there were two aspects to the testing. We had pilot areas in which we tested the delivery, working with the providers, and that was very successful, particularly in the city of York and North Yorkshire, where I was yesterday. In relation to the system, we had 4,000 parents involved. Indeed, I had a run-through to demonstrate how the system works. However, there are sometimes complications when people change jobs or when self-employed people's accounts have not been submitted. In such cases, the telephone service can be used as a back-up.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): It is clearly important to resolve the problems as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) asked a number of factual questions, along with some others, which the Minister has not been able to answer directly today. Will he write to all those who have participated in the urgent question by the end of business on Thursday, so that we may have a full understanding of the picture?

Mr Goodwill: I will certainly be happy to give updates. As I have said, we have now passed 143,000 valid applications—not 120,000, as the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) suggested earlier—and I would be more than happy to give the right hon. Gentleman ongoing updates on that.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Minister and to colleagues. In a moment, I will call the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make his application.

Unaccompanied Child Refugees

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.3 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I seek leave to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the acceptance of unaccompanied asylum seeking children into the UK.

Baroness Williams revealed in a recent response to a question in the other place that under the Dubs scheme only 200 unaccompanied asylum seeking children had so far been transferred to the United Kingdom from mainland Europe. The Government stated before the general election that before closing the scheme they would take 480 children, which in itself was the cause of outrage to many of us who had championed the Save the Children campaign to give sanctuary to 3,000 children in the UK. The Government's choice to take a figure as low as 480 was mean-spirited, blatantly politically motivated and not worthy of this House or this country—and yet the number of desperate children we have actually received is less than half that measly target.

The Government cannot use a lack of capacity or of resources as an excuse. Recent freedom of information requests have shown that local councils have voluntarily offered to accept 1,572 more children than they were supporting. Be it Syrian children, survivors of the Nazi death camps, Ugandan refugees or those fleeing genocide in the Balkans, this country's values of openness and tolerance dictate that we have a moral duty and responsibility to be a land of sanctuary. Our history shows that we are stronger and more successful because of our willingness to take in desperate refugees, who go on to become proud Britons. So why do the Government seem committed to turning their back on the world?

Our actions in this House directly affect the lives of the many hundreds of children who have a legal right to come to the United Kingdom but who are currently scattered across Europe, scared and alone. I and many others feel strongly that this issue must be debated before the House rises for the summer recess. In the summer, migrants make more trips to Europe in unsuitable boats, and I fear that all over again we are likely to see more news of people drowning while trying desperately to reach safety. Put bluntly, by the time October comes around there will be many more children alone, orphaned and living a hand-to-mouth existence in continental Europe.

We must examine our consciences. The Government made an unambitious commitment that had to be dragged out of them. They then cancelled that agreement before managing to meet even half of its terms. I ask the House to take this opportunity to address this outrage and to help these desperate children.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the acceptance of unaccompanied child refugees into the UK. I have listened carefully to his application, and on this occasion I am not persuaded that the matter is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Ordinarily, I am exhorted to say nothing more than that, but I will

say to the hon. Gentleman that I am not insensitive to the strong concern that he and others have on this matter. There is a limitation on time—we do not have unlimited time between now and the recess—but if he wants to seek other opportunities to air his concerns on this matter tomorrow, on Thursday or indeed both—who knows?—he may be successful in his quest.

In a moment, I will call the shadow Education Secretary, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

Tuition Fees

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

1.7 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the Government’s proposed increase in tuition fees with regard to the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016, statutory instrument No. 1205, and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016, statutory instrument No. 1206.

On 30 March, the then Leader of the House—now the Justice Secretary—stood at the Dispatch Box and promised a debate and a vote on the Government’s plans to increase tuition fees. The debate was scheduled for 19 April, but on 18 April the Prime Minister announced her plan to go to the country in an early general election. That meant that the debate was cancelled. Oddly, the Government have been determined not to grant the House a vote on the matter since the election.

Since then, the shadow Leader of the House raised the issue at Business questions on 22 June and on 6 and 13 July. She finally received a letter from the Leader of the House stating that the Government currently have no plans to schedule these debates in Government time. What a contrast that was with the words of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union who said last week that

“if a statutory instrument is placed in front of the House of Commons, then the Commons decides if it debates or votes on it.”

A statutory instrument is indeed before the House, but we are not being allowed to decide whether to debate or vote on it. How can he expect the Opposition to trust the Government with the sweeping powers that he wants under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

Only two weeks ago, the First Secretary of State called for a national debate on tuition fees and student debt, but that national debate will apparently not include this House. Universities and thousands of students across the country are now uncertain about the rate of tuition fees that can be charged. With neither Government nor Opposition time to debate the matter, we have no choice but to use Standing Order No. 24—so 109 days since it was first promised by Ministers I ask leave for an emergency debate on their plans to raise tuition fees.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady asks leaves to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the Government’s proposed increase in tuition fees with regard to the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016. I have listened carefully to the application, and I am satisfied that the matter raised by the hon. Lady is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Lady the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has obtained the leave of the House. I can therefore advise colleagues that the debate will be held tomorrow, 19 July, as the first item of public business. It will last for up to three hours and arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Lady’s application.

Points of Order

1.11 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The BBC is our public sector broadcaster and is paid for by all of us through the licence fee. It will announce tomorrow the details of presenters' salaries over the threshold of £150,000. The campaign to get that transparency has gone on for around 10 years, and some of us have been heavily involved in it. The BBC initially avoided the matter and then dragged its feet before eventually agreeing to publish the information, which the general public, as its paymasters, have a right to see. However, the BBC is publishing said information the day before parliamentary scrutiny ends for the summer recess—tomorrow. Have you been informed by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport of her intention to come to the House to outline the unacceptable nature of the timing of the announcement?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, both for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise it. The short answer on the last, key point in his remarks is that, no, I have received no indication from any Minister of an intention to make a statement. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and appreciate that it may be shared by many Members. That said, it is not a point of order for the Chair. The decisions made on the timing of announcements or disclosures by the BBC do not fall within the aegis of the Speaker. It is also fair to say that, strictly speaking, those judgments do not to any significant extent fall within the responsibility of Ministers. Ministers can have views on such matters, which is perfectly proper, but they are not matters for ministerial decision.

The hon. Gentleman has succeeded in putting his concern on the record, and I feel sure that it will have been heard not only by the occupants of the Treasury Bench but by the broadcasters themselves. He is an assiduous denizen of this House, and I feel sure that he will be in his place tomorrow and, indeed, in all likelihood on Thursday. I dare say that he will want to get back to Northern Ireland at some point, but I am sure he will be in his place on Thursday and springing from it with a view to giving the House the benefit of his views in the

summer Adjournment debate. That might be a suitable opportunity for him to expatiate further on this important matter.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance and advice. As you are aware, it is regular and customary for the Government to give a written response to Select Committee reports within two months of publication. The Foreign Affairs Committee published reports in March, in the previous Parliament, on Russia and Turkey. Given the topicality of the anniversary of the attempted coup in Turkey, I was hoping to read a Government response to the report on Turkey. I know we have had a general election and that the period of two months was not continuous, but the period between March and Parliament resuming is more than two months. I would therefore be grateful if you advised me on what I can do to ensure that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides the long-overdue responses to those Select Committee reports.

Mr Speaker: I am very sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, whose interest in and knowledge of such matters are well known and respected throughout the House, but the short answer is that the best way to guarantee a timely—or at least less untimely—response to the Select Committee reports will be to reconstitute the Foreign Affairs Committee as soon as possible. He is absolutely right that there has been a long delay. Ministers can take the view that they are responding to a report from a Committee and that the Foreign Affairs Committee currently does not exist and needs to be reconstituted.

I think the hon. Gentleman might have been present when I volunteered some thoughts with some asperity on the merit of getting on with the reconstitution of Select Committees. Although the Chairs have been elected, I am saddened that members have not been elected across the House—it is a pity if some have not got round to doing that. Frankly, however, there is not much that I can do other than say that I am always looking out for the hon. Gentleman. If he bobs up and down with a view to raising the matter, I will try to accommodate him. [*Interruption.*] It is always a delight to hear the views of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), to which I have been accustomed for the past 30 years. It is always better when they are offered from him on his feet, rather than from his seat, but I heard him chuntering from a sedentary position.

Drugs Policy

1.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I beg to move,

That this House has considered drugs policy.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to open this debate on drugs policy because, as many Members will know, the Government have just published an ambitious new drug strategy, which sets out a range of new actions to prevent the harms caused by drug misuse. The Government's previous drug strategy, launched in 2010, balanced action against three strands: reducing the demand for drugs; restricting the supply of drugs; and supporting individuals to recover from drug and alcohol dependence. Since the 2010 strategy was published, local communities have been placed at the heart of public health, giving local government the freedom, responsibility and funding to develop its own ways of improving public health in local populations, including action to reduce drug and alcohol use and to support those recovering from dependence.

We have already taken concerted action to tackle new threats, such as the supply of so-called legal highs, through the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, and there are positive signs that the Government's approach is working. Compared with a decade ago, drug misuse among adults and young people in England and Wales has reduced from 10.5% in 2005 to 8.4% in 2015-16.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Drug and alcohol abuse is a difficult issue to address. What consultations has the Minister had with the various groups and communities that are rightly concerned about the mental health problems related to such abuse? Has she had any discussions?

Sarah Newton: We have consulted widely with a range of experts and academics, and we are well served by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, but we have also consulted communities, users and people with frontline experience of addressing these issues. I totally agree that we have to consider the complexity of the challenges facing individuals who are drawn into substance misuse, and we must ensure that we have tailor-made recovery solutions, which will often include support on underlying vulnerabilities or mental health issues. The strategy, as I will outline in some detail, seeks to take a multifaceted, joined-up approach so that people right at the heart of it can make a sustained recovery, which is what we all want to see.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Minister says there are signs that the policy is working, but does she ever pause for thought when she sees the significant increase in the number of people dying from drug misuse in the past three years? That picture is not mirrored in other European countries that take a more enlightened approach.

Sarah Newton: There is no complacency in my approach, or in the Government's approach. In setting out the context of the new strategy, it is worth reflecting on some of our past successes—we have a good evidence base upon which to build for the future. Like the right

hon. Gentleman, I am concerned by that increase in the number of deaths, often of people with long-term substance misuse problems. If he stays for the debate, I hope he will hear about our approach to prevent those deaths, which is a key part of our new strategy. I will welcome further interventions at that point. A speech from the right hon. Gentleman, who served so well as a Health Minister in the coalition and who played such an important role in some of the Department's successes, would be carefully listened to and taken into consideration in our work in the years ahead.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The rate of drug mortality started to rise in 2013, when the ring fence was removed and local authorities became responsible for drug and alcohol treatment. Does the Minister regret her Government's decision to remove that ring fence?

Sarah Newton: I will address how more people with long-term substance misuse problems are dying, but I remind the hon. Lady that the public health grant remains ring-fenced. It is for local authorities, working with partners in their communities, to come up with the best ways of tackling people's serious and long-term substance misuse problems.

We have seen a phenomenal improvement in our understanding of the overlap between mental health problems and substance abuse problems. Councils not only have the public health grant and their partnerships in local communities; they also have the significant additional funding that the Government have made available for mental health services and community mental health services, as well as the homelessness prevention and troubled families funding. As I will hopefully have an opportunity to say, what is different about the strategy, in part, is the partnership working that we see as being at the heart of driving further improvements.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Parents will welcome the Government's focus on an updated and joined-up strategy. The mental health impacts associated with cannabis use, particularly by teenagers and young people, are one of the most upsetting issues raised in my constituency surgeries. Does she agree that this joined-up approach to local access is vital to the affected families?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I doubt there is a single Member who has not had either a family member or a constituent come to speak to them about their huge concern about the harrowing effect on young family members who get involved in drugs. There is a growing evidence base and deep concern about the impact of cannabis on the development of young minds. A lot of concern is being raised about how psychosis can be brought on by even modest exposure to cannabis. It is essential that we consider mental health and substance misuse together. I assure her that that is at the heart of what we will be doing.

Although we have all far too frequently come across these heart-breaking cases of young people who have faced the terrible consequences of taking drugs, including losing their life, it is worth noting that, overall, fewer young people are taking drugs. Reliable data show that drug use among 11 to 15-year-olds peaked in 2013, and

[Sarah Newton]

there has since been a continual decline. Again, we are not at all complacent, and we will be doing more work to educate young people about those harms.

Not only are fewer people taking drugs in the first place, but those who enter treatment services are having a good experience. The average waiting time to access treatment remains three days, and within two days for under-18s. Some 80% of young people who enter treatment leave successfully, so we have good foundations on which to work.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister is making good points about the seriousness of this issue. Does she agree that, although total drug use figures may be coming down, we all see a small number of high-profile incidents in our communities—often murders—involving drugs and drug dealing? That unsettles our communities. Does she have any hints on what we can all do to try to improve the situation? On the business of curing people, has she had a chance to look at the programmes introduced in Gloucestershire by the Nelson Trust, which takes a tough-love approach that seems to be working well?

Sarah Newton: I have not visited the Nelson Trust in my hon. Friend's constituency, but perhaps in a subsequent intervention he will invite me to come along. It is important that we continue to build the evidence base on what works. We have an open mind on innovation and on new ways of helping people give up their addiction.

My hon. Friend raises a good point on the overlap between crime and substance misuse, and of course there is a strong correlation. The modern crime prevention strategy identifies substance misuse—both alcohol and drug misuse—as a key driver of crime, so law enforcement has a critical role to play in our drug strategy's joined-up solution.

We want to ensure that law enforcement has all the tools it needs. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has had a positive impact, and hundreds of retailers across the United Kingdom have closed down or are no longer selling psychoactive substances. The police have arrested suppliers, and action by the National Crime Agency has resulted in the removal of psychoactive substances from sale by UK-based websites. The first offenders have been jailed, and we are seeing the police use their new powers, with more people going through the criminal justice system.

Richard Graham: I would be delighted if the Minister cared to visit Gloucester to see the county council's Families First troubled families programme, to look at the Nelson Trust's drug rehabilitation programme and to meet the Hollie Gazzard Trust, which is doing a lot to educate people in schools about the dangers—Hollie Gazzard herself was murdered.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend illustrates well that in a local community what is needed is a joining up of services, whereby everything from prevention in schools right the way through to the criminal justice system and recovery services is working well. Of course I will be delighted to visit his constituency to see how those different services are joining up so well in Gloucestershire.

Mims Davies: Police and law enforcement issues have also been raised in my constituency. Will the Minister be prepared to consider legislation to deal with situations where prolonged cannabis use is having an impact on neighbours, with long-term users having an impact on the daily lives of children and babies next door?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes an important point. What I would be prepared to do is write to her setting out the range of powers that already exist. I know from my constituency that the police are not always aware of all the civil powers they have, in addition to the criminal powers, to tackle some of the antisocial behaviour associated with persistent drug use. I understand and recognise the challenge she is portraying. The troubled families programme is designed in part to help those families where a drug user has substance misuse problems and, in so doing, help the children living in those households.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): We have already had more mentions in the first 10 minutes of the police than we have police officers in Bassetlaw. Will the Minister confirm that we remain the only country in the world, other than the United States, where the Government lead for drugs is in criminal justice, as opposed to health? If the approach is evidence-based, why is that the case?

Sarah Newton: I am sure there are many more police officers in Bassetlaw than there are Members in this Chamber this afternoon. I am proud that our drugs strategy is world-leading, and is recognised to be so, because we take this cross-government approach. This is not a simple issue. Tackling substance abuse and preventing people from taking drugs is not a simple thing to do, which is why we take this whole-government, joined-up approach. Our colleagues from the Department of Health are firmly involved in our activity, as is almost every Department.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sarah Newton: If colleagues do not mind, I am going to make a bit more progress as I think I will then be able to answer some of the questions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sarah Newton: Okay, I will take a few more interventions.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Greater Manchester police would argue that since the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 supply has shifted to the streets, and the product was more consistent in the headshops, whereas now it is constantly changing. Does the Minister agree that that shift is part of the reason for the epidemic of Spice use in Manchester, which is causing huge problems?

Sarah Newton: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comment. We were all really concerned when we saw those images of people on this kind of new zombie Spice in Manchester, but I was pleased that the 2016 Act proved itself in the case of Spice, because as soon as we saw those dangers emerging we were able to take action to ban it through that Act. As we did the testing to understand the

chemical components and how serious they were, we were then able to shift them into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which gave them a proper classification. Just this Friday I was pleased to see that in Manchester the whole community got together with other cities—there were people there from Nottingham and Wrexham. Law enforcement, the mayor, civil society and local authorities all came together to do exactly what we are proposing in the drugs strategy, which is to take a multi-agency approach, so that the issues that brought about those awful scenes we saw, where vulnerable homeless people in Manchester were so wickedly targeted with that type of Spice by drug dealers, are now being properly managed. This allows homeless people to get the support they need so that they do not fall prey to that activity. The more stringent measures and sentencing available under the Misuse of Drugs Act mean that the police in Manchester have the full range of tools they need to take action there.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The Netherlands has had a pragmatic, intelligent policy of drug decriminalisation for 50 years. It now has a serious prison problem, because there are not enough prisoners to fill its prisons. Is that not a problem we would like to have here?

Sarah Newton: I accept that some Members and some people in our country think that we should decriminalise drugs. I do not agree, because we are evidence-based policy makers and all the evidence shows the awful harms caused by the drugs that we ban and restrict. Our primary job is to keep people safe, and the way to do that is to prevent them from taking drugs in the first place.

Norman Lamb: I note the point about this being “evidence-based”, but the evidence clearly shows that the most dangerous drug in terms of harm is alcohol. So will the Minister explain the different approaches the Government take to alcohol, the most dangerous drug, and to cannabis?

Sarah Newton: I would not agree that alcohol is the most dangerous drug, as we can see if we look at the substances we are restricting. There are people who take alcohol to such a harmful degree that it is devastating for them, and for their family members and the wider community. I fully accept, as the Government do in the modern crime prevention strategy, that the misuse of alcohol has dramatically harmful effects and contributes to crime, but alcohol taken in moderation is not a harmful drug. The Department of Health constantly keeps this under review and is doing research all the time to understand the health impact of alcohol, and it revisits what it considers to be safe drinking guidance. Public Health England has only recently updated the guidance, which suggests that people should be consuming less alcohol.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Last week, I visited Path 2 Recovery, which does the drug recovery work in my constituency. It expressed concern about the effectiveness of the drug rehabilitation requirements, feeling that they did not have enough teeth, took up a lot of staff time and were not very effective. I note that page 23 of the strategy says that the

Government are evaluating the framework pilots. Will the Minister say something about her thinking on the current effectiveness of drug rehabilitation requirements, and whether we can do anything differently and better?

Sarah Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. He takes a deep and sustained interest in this policy area. We are very much hoping that when we have the recovery champion up and running, they will take a key role in looking at best practice and developing our evidence base as to what works. We have set out clearly in the strategy that we see sustained abstinence over a 12-month period, getting back into work and playing a full part in society as key outcomes of recovery. That will address some of my hon. Friend’s concerns about how in the past too many drug recovery programmes have really just been a revolving door, where people came in and were there for too short a time, and although they may have got clean, what they needed was support on housing, jobs or education so that they could sustain their recovery. Those programmes were not incentivised to enable that. So we are looking at outcome frameworks over a longer period which make sure people have the best possible chance of recovery, with mental health services and recovery services involved in this.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I wish to refer back to the point about alcohol abuse, with which I agree. Alcohol is consumed throughout this House; we have 15 bars and restaurants in this place, all selling us alcohol. Some 90% of recreational drug users are not a problem—they consume their drugs and get on with their life—and only about 10% are a problem, so I cannot see why the Minister wants to take alcohol as one problem and drugs as another.

Sarah Newton: Our published drugs strategy definitely recognises the relationship between those who take drugs and those who drink alcohol, and understanding that relationship will be a key part of our recovery programmes. In our modern crime prevention strategy, we have a whole series of actions around alcohol. Public Health England and the NHS do a lot of work in that area as well. We are very understanding of the hon. Gentleman’s point, and it will form part of our joined-up integrated approach. Is there a further question I can take before making some progress?

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): An enormous part of the harm that is done by drugs is when people, particularly young people, do not know what it is that they are taking. If we are considering a harm prevention strategy, should we not be trying to ensure that we can protect people and help them to know what they are taking? Does that not include making drugs available legally so that we can test them and properly protect people?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We need to be really clear here: we do not ban substances without an evidence base that shows that they are harmful to people’s health. The reason why we put in those protections—whether it is through the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, or the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971—is that the evidence base clearly shows that these substances are harmful. There is no safe way that people

[Sarah Newton]

can take these products. It would be terrible to confuse young people by saying that they can, somehow, safely take a legal high. I know how difficult it is to have these conversations with young people; I have three children in their 20s. I understand the world in which they live and the temptations with which they are faced, but that is why it is so important that we have very clear messages and effective education tools for teachers, which we are investing in now. We will be legislating to make personal, social, health and economic education statutory in schools so that every young person understands the risks of taking alcohol and drugs, which will make them more resilient and more able to resist the temptations. I have said to my own children, “If you can’t go into Boots or any other reputable pharmacist and buy something, then it will not be good for you.” It is really important that we have very simple and clear messages for young people.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for generously giving way so many times, but I must challenge her. She said a moment ago that there is such a thing as a safe level of consumption of alcohol, but that is not what the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines say. The NICE guidelines are clear and accurate: there is no safe level of consumption of alcohol. We allow it to be consumed legally and we provide information, treatment and recovery, but we do not criminalise people who are consuming alcohol. Why will she not consider the graph that I can show her—*[Interruption.]* No, I am not supposed to do that. Evidence is available that shows just how much more harmful alcohol is than any other drug.

Sarah Newton: This debate today is about the drugs strategy. I have been very generous in answering questions. We understand that there is a relationship between drugs and alcohol, but I will not be drawn into a wider debate about the current legal framework around alcohol, because we are here today to talk about our drugs policy. *[Interruption.]* May I just finish my point? Look, our policy is based on independent evidence, and is informed by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. The vast majority of academic and medical research backs up our position.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sarah Newton: No, I will not give way as I wish to make some progress. I will answer some more questions later.

Let me remind everyone that we are not at all complacent about this. We definitely recognise the scale of the threat that drugs continue to pose to our society. They do destroy lives and have very serious impacts on families and communities. The cost to society is about £10 billion a year, half of which is related to theft and criminal activity around drug usage.

I wish to go back to this very serious point about drug-related deaths and how they have increased by 10% in the past year. Again, using the best available evidence, we understand that there is a cohort of people—and of older people—who have been taking heroin and crack cocaine for some time, which has had a very

significant impact not only on their mental health, but their physical health. That is a driving factor in our strategy. Using the evidence base, we are able to segment better the treatment and the recovery programmes. We will be doing that with the firm hope that, by tailor-making the support that they need, we will see fewer people die and more people—even if they have been taking drugs for some time—being able to get off drugs and have the independent and fulfilled life that we want everyone to enjoy.

We are also very concerned about the way that synthetic cannabinoids—commonly known as Spice—have been so ruthlessly targeted at the homeless population. We are working on that, alongside our homelessness reduction programmes, with mental health services. In particular, we are looking at young people who might be vulnerable to these types of substances. We want to ensure that everybody has access to the best possible recovery programme.

The strategy builds on the three strands of the previous strategy—reducing demand, restricting supply and building recovery—by embracing a smarter, partnership-based approach, both locally and nationally, and recognising the links between different Government Departments and different Government ambitions. Clearly, we want to reduce crime, improve people’s life chances, promote better health, tackle homelessness and protect the most vulnerable people in our society. The strategy sets out key actions covering the wide range of partners critical to tackling drug misuse successfully, including those in education, health, safeguarding, criminal justice, housing and employment.

The strategy also introduces a new fourth strand on global action to bring out the critical importance of international co-operation. We want to reduce the demand for drugs by acting early to prevent people, especially young people, from taking drugs in the first place and then preventing escalation to more harmful use. This starts with universal action to give all young people the resilience and confidence they need to make positive choices about their health and well-being, including resisting drugs. For example, we will be legislating to make PSHE statutory in schools and expanding the Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service for young people. That will be complemented with more targeted action to prevent drug misuse among vulnerable groups, including young people who are not in education, employment or training, looked-after children, offenders and the homeless. There will also be a targeted approach for emerging and evolving threats such as performance-enhancing drugs, so-called chemsex drugs and, sadly, the misuse of prescription drugs.

Tough enforcement is also a fundamental part of our drug strategy and we will continue to bear down on those who seek to benefit from the misery caused to others. We will take a smarter approach to restricting the supply of drugs, adapting our approach to reflect changes in criminal activity. For example, we have taken action to close down the mobile phone lines being used for drug dealing and other dreadful exploitation such as the trafficking of young people to sell drugs. Those mobile phone lines will be closed down. We will also use innovative data and technology to disrupt supply over the darknet. Our Serious Organised Crime Agency and the National Crime Agency have a very important role to play.

Diana Johnson: Let me take the Minister back to investment and the idea that if this matter was treated as a health issue, there would be more investment in drug treatment services. Is it not the case that in France, where this is treated as a health issue, the investment is less than it is here where we have treated it as a criminal justice issue and a health issue combined?

Sarah Newton: I just do not accept the premise of what the hon. Lady is saying. We do not take it in the way that she describes. We see this very much as a partnership or a joined-up whole Government approach. Of course health and recovery is at the centre of our strategy. It is not a fair interpretation to say that this is led by justice. It is about a joined-up whole system approach. Recovery remains a vital part of the Government's approach.

John Mann: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I will make a bit more progress. We are absolutely determined to improve support for those dependent on drugs by raising the quality of treatment, and to improve outcomes by ensuring that people get the right interventions for their needs. That means ensuring that they can access the full range of services to help them rebuild their life, which may include mental health, housing, employment and training services, and a lot of support for a stable family life, free from crime. I am pleased that we will appoint a national recovery champion, who will drive progress by visiting different parts of the country to identify good practice and ensure local collaboration. We will also encourage partnership working and transparency by developing a new set of outcome measures to give local areas further support through Public Health England.

For the first time, we are setting out global action. We are already taking a global lead on our psychoactive substance work, encouraging data exchange to give us a richer picture of international trends, and bringing in global bans on the most harmful new psychoactive substances. We will continue our work through the United Nations. We have a balanced, evidence-based approach to drugs. Collaborating with partners around the world will help to give us a better intelligence base and enable us to take better action.

I hope that Members will see that this is a truly cross-Government strategy that requires the commitment and coming together of many Departments. The Home Secretary will establish a new drugs strategy board, of which I will be a member. It will include people from all the key Government Departments, Public Health England, and national police leads. Then we can all plan together to implement the strategy and hold each other to account. I am confident that the strategy is grounded in the best available evidence. We consulted extensively with key partners working in the drugs field, and I am sure that the strategy will make a lasting difference, but we know that there is no easy way to tackle drugs and the harms that they cause, and we need to do much more. Our strategy is flexible enough to enable us to respond to emerging threats.

Finally, by working together across government, locally and nationally, we can genuinely deliver the safer, healthier Britain, free from the harm of drugs, that we all want.

1.52 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Everyone in this Chamber knows that drug abuse casts a long shadow over our society. Whether it is the many thousands of crimes committed by drug users seeking to fund their habit—fully 45% of acquisitive crime is committed by regular heroin or crack cocaine users—the chaos caused in families and communities by drug use, or the lives ruined or cut short by it, the scale of the problem is truly shocking. We have the highest recorded level of mortality from drugs misuse since records began. There are record numbers of deaths from morphine or heroin, and from cocaine abuse. Under this Government, the UK has become the drugs overdose capital of Europe.

According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, one in three of Europe's overdose deaths—they are mainly related to opioids—occurs in the UK. That is roughly 10 families a day bereaved as a result of illegal drugs—more than are bereaved in traffic accidents. We have an overwhelming economic, moral and public health case for examining this country's drugs policy.

Labour Members welcome the publication this month of the 2017 drugs strategy, even though it comes two years after the Government's self-imposed deadline. However, having waited nearly two years for it, we have to confess to being a little disappointed. Let us remember what has happened along the way. Drug rehabilitation centres have been closed; budgets to tackle drug abuse have been cut; key services such as the NHS are under increasing pressure; and there have been cuts to police officers and Border Force guards by the thousand. In the light of these constrained resources, it is not clear how much impact this strategy, in which there is much to welcome in principle, will have.

Official drug strategies always include reducing demand, increasing awareness and education, restricting supply, tackling organised crime and improving treatment and recovery, so those elements, although important, are not new. The Government's recognition of the importance of evidence-based treatment, recovery and harm reduction is welcome, but what stakeholders, and families and communities up and down the country who are suffering from drug abuse, want to know is whether the strategy is not just old methods in a shinier package. We frequently use the term “war on drugs”; I ask the Minister how exactly we expect to win a war with reduced forces and resources on the frontline.

Responsibility for drug and alcohol treatment was transferred from the NHS to local authorities in 2013, which was undoubtedly a good idea in principle; local authorities are much better placed than central Government to facilitate co-operation between drug and alcohol services, local police, those involved in social and youth work, education and housing and other stakeholders, but sadly local authorities gained those new responsibilities at a time of bone-crunching pressure on their budgets, and this transfer of responsibility meant an end to ring-fenced budgets for drug treatment.

Diana Johnson: I agree exactly with my right hon. Friend, but does she think that when the Government transferred that responsibility to local authorities, they missed a trick by not making it clear that police and crime commissioners and representatives from the criminal

[*Diana Johnson*]

justice system should sit on health and wellbeing boards, so that they could provide input on drug and alcohol treatment services?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is exactly right, because the purpose of transferring responsibility to local authorities was that they should bring together all the stakeholders, including police and crime commissioners and the local police.

John Mann: Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning the vast number of Labour local authorities that, in 2013, took their drug service out of the NHS and gave it to private providers? That includes mine in Nottinghamshire. Should we not have a Labour party position that would stop them doing this?

Ms Abbott: It is unfortunate that many authorities, including many Labour authorities, privatised these services. Privatising them necessarily makes it harder to achieve the co-ordination and co-operation that was the whole point of having these services sit in the local authorities.

Local councils face unprecedented cuts to their funding—anything from 25% to 40% of their entire budget. Is it any wonder that drug-related deaths are increasing when local authorities do not have the funds necessary for comprehensive treatment programmes?

Norman Lamb: The right hon. Lady has talked about the war on drugs, and how it has been undermined by a lack of resources, but does she favour simply increasing the resources in that war, or a more enlightened approach that involves decriminalisation and, potentially, the regulation of cannabis markets so that we take the criminals out of the market altogether?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We cannot have a meaningful strategy on drug abuse without looking at the question of resources, but I would be the first to say that it is more complex than simply providing more money.

To give an overview of what local authorities are facing, Barnsley cut its drug and alcohol service by more than a third between 2015-16 and 2016-17. Some services will be unavailable and key drugs practitioners will be made redundant. Staffordshire County Council was forced to make cuts of 45% to its drug and alcohol treatment budget over the past two years, due to its local commissioning group pulling the expected £15 million of NHS funding. Middlesbrough Council, which sadly has one of the highest rates of death from heroin overdoses in the country, cut its budget by £1 million last year.

When the Home Office announced those policies, it correctly said that for every £1 spent on public health, £2.50 is saved. However, instead of helping local authorities to follow that logic, the Government have obliged them to pursue short-term cuts. Some local authorities have tried, and some have been particularly innovative in seeking efficiencies in their public health budgets, but the reality is that too many are looking at significant reductions in services, and some are even privatising services. When it comes to public health, the Government

talk a good talk but do not follow through with the resources. I note with dismay that the strategy includes no mention of providing more resources to local authorities, which after all are on the frontline of any strategy against drug use.

Ruth George: Bearing in mind the figures that my right hon. Friend has set out—for every £1 spent on public health, £2.50 is saved for the public purse—does she agree that the overall cuts of £85 million to local authorities' public health budgets are a false economy that are not serving our communities, or even the Exchequer?

Ms Abbott: I think that the public health cuts were disastrous. The Treasury, in an extraordinary example of short-term thinking, clawed back the funds that had been promised. The King's Fund has shown that local authorities in England are being forced to spend more than 5% less on public health initiatives this year than in 2014, and tackling drug misuse in adults will face a 5.5% cut of more than £22 million. Until the Government put their money where their mouth is on the drugs strategy, they will have to accept that some stakeholders remain sceptical.

There was an interesting discussion about alcohol earlier in the debate. Ministers seem to struggle with the notion that alcohol is actually a drug, but the truth is that in absolute terms alcohol causes more harm than any illegal drug. It is shocking that the strategy managed only two paragraphs on alcohol, which is a major killer in Britain today. Professor Ian Gilmore, chair of Alcohol Health Alliance UK, has said that

"we also need a dedicated strategy on alcohol which recognises the breadth of harm done by alcohol. In the UK alcohol is responsible for over 26,000 deaths per year, over 1 million hospital admissions per year, and...alcohol cost the UK economy between £27—£52 billion in 2016."

In 2015, there were 8,000 casualties caused by drink-driving alone. Professor Ian Gilmore continued:

"The time has come for the Government to take an evidence-based approach to controlling the supply of and reducing the demand for a legal drug which is sold on virtually every street corner, sometimes at pocket money prices."

Paul Flynn: Portugal de-penalised drug use in 2001 and, as a result, halved the number of heroin users in the country, and the number of deaths has fallen from 80 a year to 16 a year. In the 30 years in which my right hon. Friend and I have been in the House, can she think of any initiative by any Government that has reduced drug harm so spectacularly?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is a passionate proponent of decriminalisation, and I think that he makes his own case.

The strategy claims that the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has been hugely successful in stopping the proliferation of legal highs. It is true that in the first six months since the Act came into force nearly 500 people were arrested. However, as various drug charities suspected, despite those measures demand for the substances continues to increase. So-called legal highs have simply been pushed into the black market or on to the internet, which I suspect is why the Government have in the same breath claimed that they will focus on eliminating the vast range of problems that these substances cause. That exposes

something that the Opposition made clear during the passage of the Act: legislation is effective only if there is a wider strategy in place.

The strategy has now been produced, but meanwhile legal highs are more dangerous than ever, affecting the poorest and most vulnerable in society. It remains the case that too many people, particularly women, go to prison without a drug habit and leave with a drug habit. I believe that Ministers, working with the Ministry of Justice, could do a great deal more to make our prisons drug-free zones. It is an elementary issue, but one that the Government continue to fail to address.

I am sure that most Members were as alarmed as I was last year by CCTV footage of a drone making deliveries to a prison. That is the favoured manner of getting contraband, in the form of mobile phones, weapons and drugs, into our prisons. There are no easy answers, but if there are not enough guards to guard the prisoners, I find it hard to believe that they could devote much time to searching one another or taking down drug-mule drones. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Justice has repeatedly said that the decimation of prison officer numbers under the Conservatives is a key reason for the Government's inability to stem the growing influx of drugs into prisons. What specific extra staffing resources will be given to prisons to enable officers and prison authorities to meet the objectives of the new drugs strategy?

The Minister referred to global issues and to the international war on drugs, but she will be aware that it is largely regarded as failing. We would like to hear how Ministers plan to make the international war on drugs more successful than it has been. There are some aspects of the strategy that we welcome. For example, it is excellent that greater efforts will be made to provide young people with effective, evidence-based drug prevention education. As a parent, I think that most parents are unable to keep up with the kinds of drugs that young people are discovering nowadays. As I said earlier, it is very important that prisoners are given more help to get into recovery and that their progress is monitored closely. We need far clearer and more explicit guidelines on the value of opioid maintenance treatment which, if properly implemented, allows many people with opioid dependence to live their life and, crucially, prevents overdoses.

Another important aspect of the strategy is its recognition that people can slip through the cracks of dual diagnosis of mental health problems and problem substance use. I am glad that the strategy, at least in principle, wants those people to be better catered for, rather than shunted between services that are reluctant to take on complex and demanding cases.

There is a tendency to regard drug use and abuse as a personal failure. We in the Opposition would rather regard it as a societal failure. We say that any drug strategy has to look at the broader picture, including what is happening in society and the resources available. Although we welcome the drug strategy in principle, we question whether the resources or the will is there to make its worthy aims real and manifest.

2.9 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I suspect that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I will have sympathy with my hon. Friend the Minister, given the bounds within which she has had to present

this strategy to the House. She presented the strategy with candour; my only concern is whether she really believes in it. As I will discuss, the evidence from around the world is that the approach within the strategy is profoundly mistaken and simply not working.

I rather suspect that the speech made by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) will have disappointed those behind her the most: here was an opportunity really to engage in thinking on this issue and to persuade us to consider the actual evidence from around the world. I fear that the right hon. Lady opted for the "safety first" routine: she will have avoided disagreeable headlines about the Opposition's drug policy in the *Daily Mail*. As I shall come on to say, we need a space in which we can properly consider the issue. The kernel of my argument is that we need a royal commission to assess our drugs policy, to get it to the right place.

President Nixon declared a war on drugs in 1971. Nearly half a century later, I defy anyone to disagree that it has been a global public policy catastrophe. We desperately need a new approach and a completely different strategy. Although I welcome the emphasis that the Government strategy puts on improving treatment and recovery for users, it also rehearses the same failed arguments for prohibition and criminalisation that have patently failed. The measure of that failure is spelt out in the strategy itself: it tells us that in England and Wales the number of deaths from drug misuse registered in 2015 increased by 10.3% to 2,479. That follows an increase of 14.9% in the previous year and 19.6% the year before that. Deaths involving heroin—about half the total—more than doubled from 2012 to 2015, as the right hon. Lady mentioned. The strategy also informs us that, each year in the United Kingdom, drugs cost society £10.7 billion in policing, healthcare and crime, with drug-fuelled theft alone costing £6 billion a year.

I am delighted that the Government have published these figures. When I was the criminal justice Minister, between 2010 and 2012, the Ministry of Justice would not provide the numbers to me, directly or otherwise. In the end, I got Bob Ainsworth, a former drugs policy Minister, to table a written parliamentary question to me as a way of eliciting the numbers from the Government. I am fine about their being on the public record now: we can see the cost of our failure of public policy in this area.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is noted for his candour on this subject and the House respects him for it. Until 1968 we ran what was widely known throughout the world as the British system: GPs prescribed diamorphine hydrochloride and cocaine hydrochloride. We had nothing like the number of deaths today because of the purity of the product. Now the cause of death is impurity and differentiated supplies.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it has been almost impossible to have a rational, sensible and sane debate on this subject? The 1968 legislation was a panicked reaction, fuelled by the most reactionary forces. As a humble individual on these Benches, I ask the hon. Gentleman to accept my wholehearted support for his excellent idea that a royal commission should consider this issue. Frankly, there is not a country in the world that does not have a drug problem, and there is certainly no victory in the so-called war on drugs.

Crispin Blunt: I wholly agree. If the evidence of failure is clear in the United Kingdom, the problem is dramatically worse in other countries of the world. However, even in the UK, as page 16 of the strategy makes clear, drugs are “a significant threat to our national security.”

There is a way of dealing with the problem.

Ever since prohibition or criminalisation of illicit drug use was enshrined in the 1961 UN convention on narcotic drugs, we have been fighting a losing battle to stem the global drugs trade. As is increasingly recognised—especially in Latin America, where many leaders are crying out for their societies to be rescued from the malign fall-out from a multi-billion dollar criminal industry—eradication, interdiction and criminalisation of consumption have failed. We have left the manufacture and supply in the hands of organised criminals and treated their victims—many of whom are vulnerable members of our society and many of whom have mental illnesses—as criminals, and they are unable or unwilling to seek medical help due to the illegality, exclusion and stigma.

I hope that hon. Members will reflect on this simple statistic: between 2006 and 2013, 111,000 people died in the Mexican drug war—as a result not of drug consumption, but of the wars over the control of this vast industry. Building on the work of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, convened by former Presidents of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, the Global Commission on Drug Policy has opened a public discussion about the association between the drug trade, violence and corruption.

Norman Lamb: I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. He has talked about the number of people who have lost their lives through violence in Latin America. Does he agree that the policy engenders violence in our own communities—particularly poor communities—in this country? The only way in which the supply to a particular community can be maintained is through the use of extreme violence. Does that not add to the case for much needed reform?

Crispin Blunt: Unsurprisingly, I agree entirely with the right hon. Gentleman.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I declare an interest: I used to prosecute national-level drug barons. We are talking about gun-toting criminals, who think nothing of shooting each other and the people who carry their drugs for them. What on earth does my hon. Friend think their reaction will be to the idea of drugs being regulated? Does he really think that these awful people are suddenly going to become law-abiding citizens?

Crispin Blunt: I shall come to my hon. Friend’s point directly. We have set up the business model that those people use. The value of that business model is why people go to the lengths they do to kill so many in trying to maintain control.

I come back to commending the work of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which has advocated a balanced, comprehensive and evidence-based debate on drugs, focusing on humane and effective solutions to

reduce the harm caused by drugs to individuals and societies. Last year, it succeeded in getting the issue back on the international agenda at the United Nations General Assembly special session. Tragically, however, the regressive voices upholding prohibition and criminalisation stopped the endorsement of a new approach. All the while, however, more and more countries are starting new policies, while we lag behind.

Decriminalisation of personal possession is proving to have significant effects in reducing harm where it has been tried. In Portugal, where the possession of small amounts of drugs has been de-penalised since 2001, there is now a clear political consensus behind the policy. The data show that decriminalisation has not led to increased drug usage rates—in fact, in numerous categories, Portuguese usage rates are now among the lowest in the EU, particularly in comparison with states with stringent criminalisation regimes. Drug-related pathologies, such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to misuse, have decreased dramatically as the Government are able to offer treatment programmes without having to drag users into the criminal justice system, where it becomes even harder to manage addiction and abuse. The focus is public health; penalties are used only if considered necessary and productive.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is being generous in allowing me to intervene. I refer again to my experience in the criminal courts. We tried that experiment in this country, when David Blunkett downgraded the classification of cannabis. The impact of that on the ground in magistrates courts up and down the country was terrible. Young people were coming to court with very severe mental health problems because of their use of cannabis. We tried the experiment and it failed.

Crispin Blunt: It has not failed. If we adjust one part of the system and move from a categorisation of B to C, as we did with cannabis, then that sends a message about usage and the rest. However, if the supply of cannabis is in the hands of people who are not going to tell people what is in it, or educate them as to the effect it is going to have on their mind, it is hardly surprising that we see a massive increase in schizophrenia caused by the use of these drugs, because people do not know what they are buying and we are not in a position to educate them properly about the consequences of their use. That is why there is a public health issue about getting a regulated supply into place whereby we could educate people at the point of purchase. I will come on to talk about the relationship between the dealer and his interest in how he deals with his client base in a regulated and licensed system.

Paul Flynn: Having been in the House at the time of David Blunkett’s change in the category of cannabis, and very much involved with it, I remember that everyone predicted an increase in cannabis use when the classification was changed. That did not happen. In fact, there was a reduction in the use of cannabis when the penalties were less. Contrary to all the expectations, and the great argument we hear in this place, it is not the drugs that are killing people—it is prohibition that is killing people.

Crispin Blunt: While I am obviously minded to agree with the hon. Gentleman, the arguments that my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle

(Victoria Atkins) and the Government are putting forward in trying to send a message should be considered somewhere so that we can go through the evidence. That is very difficult to do in a charged environment where the tabloid press will be seeking to send a message if we are perceived to be weak in this area of public policy. Yet hundreds of thousands of people across the world are dying because this policy is in the wrong place globally. I rather hope that a royal commission here in the United Kingdom could assist us in getting to a place where, based on evidence, we can begin to lead the international debate.

As well as the decriminalisation of personal possession, we ought to consider the merits of a legal, regulated market taken out of the control of organised crime. A recent report by the drugs policy think-tank Volteface makes the case for a legal, regulated cannabis market in the UK to improve support, guidance and access to treatment for people experiencing problematic cannabis use. It found that the current illegal and unregulated market means that cannabis users are hidden from health practitioners, leaving them

“fumbling around in the dark trying to find them”.

Among people showing signs of cannabis dependence, only 14.6% have ever received treatment, help or support specifically because of their drug use, and 5.5% had received it in the previous six months. The report says a regulated market would provide

“opportunities for more public guidance, packaging controls, products which vary in potency, research into cannabis culture and consumption to improve interventions, and reduced stigma to enable access to services.”

I am sorry to say that the drug dealers reading the strategy and watching this debate will simply laugh at us. We are doing nothing to undermine their basic business model. By ensuring that supply is criminal, we have created a highly lucrative, criminal black market for the distribution and sale of drugs, worth an estimated £4.6 billion per year in the United Kingdom—and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and Europol estimate that the global market is worth \$435 billion a year. That is an astonishing amount of money, and it is hardly surprising that people arm themselves, and fight and kill, to try to maintain their share of that market.

Drugs are believed to account for some 20% of all crime proceeds, with about 50% of all organised crime groups believed to be involved in drugs, and about half of transnational organised crime proceeds derive from the drugs trade. Profit margins are enormous, with 100-fold increases in price from production to retail. Exploited customers, trapped in addiction—indeed, having been encouraged and incentivised there by the criminal dealer—turn to crime to pay the inflated prices. Those using heroin, cocaine or crack cocaine are estimated to commit between a third and a half of all acquisitive crime. Drug dealers vie with one another to gain market exclusivity in their domains, leading to further appalling gang violence.

Yet that is only part of the story, as the uncomfortable truth is that respect for our laws is diminished when large swathes of the population can see no difference between their recreational drugs of choice and their recreational use of alcohol and tobacco. Alcohol prohibition was an acknowledged public policy disaster when it was tried in the United States in the 1920s. If the state or its licensed agents became a benign, regulated monopoly supplier instead, that would smash the drug dealer’s

business model. Proceeds from sales or taxation of sales would pay for treatment and public health education. We would protect people because they would know what they were buying.

Instead of more of the same, we should be brave enough to be at the forefront of international thinking. Legalisation, licensing and regulation may be radical ideas for the United Kingdom, but forms of decriminalisation are already being widely put into practice in Europe and in North America and Latin America. The merits of other countries’ approaches, and the extensive work of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, warrant proper consideration in British public debate and policy making. A royal commission would be able to do that. It would be the most appropriate way to consider fully and carefully the complex issues involved and all the policy options, exploring best practice abroad and responding to increasing calls here and internationally for a truly new strategy.

2.26 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in today’s general debate on drugs policy—a very important issue that affects every community, class and creed in the country. The scourge of drugs misuse and its associated criminal and antisocial behaviours has been a blight on too many of our cities, towns and villages for far too long.

Only last week, I conducted a home visit to a distraught family who were coming to terms with the tragic loss of a young man from drug misuse—a thoroughly decent family who had tried to get help for their loved one, but sadly were not successful in time. I will not go into the specific details, but a grieving mother and sister explained about the physical and behavioural changes they observed, and about their loved one stealing from other family members and the general antisocial behaviour that ensued. This story is not uncommon across any of our communities.

That set of circumstances brought home to me why we need aggressively to tackle the forces of organised crime, who are making millions from human misery—effective enforcement against the dealers is a key factor in the war against drugs—while sympathetically addressing the health and safety of users, and with greater emphasis on prevention and harm reduction rather than punitive punishments. Once criminalised, these victims can often face further life challenges and stigmatisation, all of which can result in users finding it harder to recover and to move on from drug problems and addiction, in some cases even trapping them in a self-destructive cycle.

As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, health and justice, which are key areas in any joined-up drugs policy, are devolved to Scotland. The regulation of all proscribed drugs remains a reserved issue, and the policy is set by the UK Government. There is a strong argument that drugs policy should also be devolved to Scotland. The Minister herself referred to a joined-up, whole-policy approach, and that would be easier to achieve in a Scottish context if we had all the levers of policy. However, the Scottish Government continue to work with the Home Office to implement a series of actions against drug misuse in Scotland.

It is estimated that drug misuse costs society in Scotland £3.5 billion a year. That is very similar to the impact of alcohol misuse, which is estimated to cost £3.6 billion a year. Combined, this amounts to about £1,800 for every adult. In 2008, the SNP Government

[Martyn Day]

published the current national drugs strategy for Scotland, “The Road to Recovery”, which set out a new strategic direction for tackling drug misuse based on treatment services promoting recovery. The strategy continues to receive cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament. Evidence has shown that drug taking in the general population is falling, with misuse among young people at its lowest in a decade. However, drug deaths are currently at their highest. The approach taken recognises the importance of supporting families, and the number of family support organisations across Scotland is growing. In addition, several national organisations have been established or commissioned to support delivery of the strategy. They include the Scottish Recovery Consortium, which was established to drive and promote recovery for individuals, family members and communities affected by drugs, as well as Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs and the recently launched Partnership for Action on Drugs in Scotland.

The Scottish Government also work with Scotland’s 38 alcohol and drug partnerships, which bring together local partners, including health boards, local authorities, police and voluntary agencies. They are responsible for developing local strategies for tackling problem alcohol and drug use, and promoting recovery, based on an assessment of local needs. A good example is the current Glasgow city health and social care partnership proposals for a pilot safer drug consumption and heroin assisted treatment facility in the city centre. The latest iteration of its business case was presented to the HSCP on 21 June 2017. The facility is designed to service the needs of an estimated 400 to 500 individuals who inject publicly in the city centre and experience high levels of harm. In particular, it is anticipated that the facility will significantly reduce the risk of further outbreaks of blood-borne viruses.

In 2015 there were 157 drug-related deaths in the Glasgow City Council area—up from 114 the previous year—and 132 of them involved an opiate or opioid. The recent rise in deaths is concerning and not unique to Glasgow. I am grateful to the Transform Drug Policy Foundation for its briefing, which informed me that around a third of Europe’s drug misuse deaths occur in the UK. We all need to do something to address this challenge. The British Medical Association and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs have indicated their support for pursuing safer drug consumption proposals to promote harm reduction. Although that remains a matter for authorities in Glasgow to take forward, the Scottish Government will subsequently consider any formal proposal that is brought to their attention for consideration.

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is reserved legislation, so any proposal is dependent on authorities in Glasgow making a formal request to the Lord Advocate to vary prosecution guidance. It would make sense to devolve all drugs policy to Scotland, to allow the Scottish Parliament to legislate on it and other issues.

John Mann: The Scottish Government have followed entirely the Tory Government’s approach on recovery-based treatment, as opposed to NHS treatment. Why would devolving power make a ha’pence of difference, when all the SNP has done is to adopt Tory policies and their consequential failures?

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but I am saying that it would be another tool in our armoury that might allow future drugs policy to go in a different direction. We can only work within the current constraints. At its conference last year, the Scottish National party backed the decriminalisation of cannabis for medicinal use, but that is another issue currently reserved to Westminster, so we cannot go down that line.

A few years ago, a survey conducted by Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs found that peer support was an important part of the recovery process. It also found that despite the pressures most families wait at least two years before seeking help—a delay that can prove fatal, as evidenced by the constituents I mentioned earlier. Their loved one had been using for about six months, by their own reckoning, prior to his death.

In my area we have a wide range of support services. In Linlithgow, the 1st Step Café is run by people who are in recovery, and who now help others living with the effects of addiction. Across West Lothian, the social work addictions team—known as SWAT—supports those affected by drugs or alcohol to plan for recovery, and promotes goal-focused work to make positive changes. In the Falkirk and Forth valley area, Addictions Support and Counselling assists with community rehabilitation and recovery.

Undoubtedly for the users, their families and local communities, recovery is the key, but it cannot work on its own. It has to be coupled with education about the dangers and about harm reduction, and with public health measures—improving access to treatment and reducing waiting times. In short, the issue is no longer simply one of law enforcement, although tackling the supply of drugs and drug-related anti-social behaviour will, I suspect, remain a permanent feature of our societies for some considerable time.

2.34 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I very much welcome the strategy, with its emphasis on effectively treating and, even more importantly, preventing substance misuse problems. I welcome the acknowledgement that national and local government have a clear responsibility to improve public health with regard to addictions. Indeed, because such problems often affect the most vulnerable in society, this is a matter of social justice. I welcome the strategy’s recognition of that, and of the clear and very sad links between substance misuse and a range of other issues: underperformance at school and later exclusion from the job market, domestic abuse, mental ill health, sexual exploitation, homelessness and imprisonment.

I welcome the recognition of the need for a joined-up, partnership approach to address those issues. I implore local government to ensure that, as some local authorities do, individuals receive support from one lead caseworker rather than from a confusing mix of social workers and agencies. I heard of one family who had to cope—yes, cope is the right word—with 26 different local agencies trying to help them.

I particularly welcome the strategy’s focus on helping the most vulnerable young people, such as those in care, those on the streets, those in the criminal justice system or at risk of entering it, those in troubled families and young girls at risk of entering prostitution. We know

how pimps use drugs to enslave young girls, particularly those who have been trafficked. I welcome the strategy's prioritisation of helping those young people, many of whom have never had a first chance in life. The strategy's approach is designed to give them the chance they need to live a life of self-worth, free of the devastating impact of substance misuse.

I particularly welcome the Minister's statement that we must look at mental health and substance misuse together, and the recognition of the key role that parents and families can play in the treatment and prevention of substance misuse. Family breakdown—or, if not breakdown, chaotic or dysfunctional family relationships—must surely be one of the key reasons, if not the key reason, for young people seeking comfort in drugs. I welcome the inclusion in the strategy of the need to support families in their own right, with the suggestion:

“Evidence-based psychological interventions which involve family members should be available locally and local areas should ensure that the support needs of families and carers affected by drug misuse are appropriately met.”

That echoes a comment piece that I wrote for this week's *The House* magazine about young people's mental health problems, in which I said that we need to do much more to strengthen family relationships and offer holistic family support, engaging parents, carers or wider family members. If we are to do that, there needs to be substantial growth in the number of people in local authority services trained to provide relationship and family support, and to provide appropriate counselling and help for young people in such difficulties. I am glad, too, that the strategy recognises that the reality of harm experienced by substance abusers' families is significant, and that families need help as well.

I am chair of the all-party group on alcohol harm. I recognise that the strategy contains recommendations for joined-up action on alcohol and drugs, and that areas of the strategy apply to both. As we have heard this afternoon, however, we need to do more. Statistics illustrate the extent of the harm caused by alcohol. In 2015 there were 2,479 deaths from drug misuse. In the same year, there were 23,000 alcohol-related deaths. Drug deaths equate to only 10% of the number of deaths caused by alcohol. We must rise to the challenge of providing sufficient resources and setting out a clear Government alcohol strategy. The current strategy is more than five years old, and much has changed in that time—yet, sadly, much has stayed the same.

I would particularly like the Government to address the impact of alcoholic parents or carers on children. An estimated 2.5 million children in this country live with problematic drinkers. In a debate on alcohol harm that I secured on 2 February, Members gave deeply moving accounts of living as children with alcoholic parents and carers. Those of us in the Chamber very much welcomed the response of the then Under-Secretary of State for Health, the former Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who said that she would look into the matter. I ask the Minister to take back to her successor, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), a request for further progress, because the very important and specific issue of children living with problematic drinkers has not been sufficiently addressed.

Evidence shows that spending money on treatment is effective, with every £1 invested generating £2.50 of savings for society. Yet only 6% of dependent drinkers

in this country actually access treatment. It is vital that we recognise the need to review the alcohol strategy. The current level of alcohol harm illustrates the need to do so urgently. If Members will bear with me, I want to go into this in a little more detail. The harm caused by alcohol consumption extends not just to the families of the individuals involved but to wider society. It often harms innocent bystanders, such as those injured in road traffic accidents or patients needing treatment for serious illnesses who have to wait because precious NHS resources are being used to tackle the issue. It affects us all as taxpayers through the tax bills we pay, and it affects the emergency services.

Just a few months ago, our all-party group produced a report, “The Frontline Battle”, on the impact of the misuse of alcohol on those who serve us in the emergency services. Some of the stories about emergency services staff being assaulted are heartrending. I therefore welcome the private Member's Bill, which I understand will be presented by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) tomorrow, to address assaults on emergency services staff. However, we cannot address that without also looking at the fact that so many of those attacks are caused by alcohol abuse.

There has never been a greater need for robust Government action to tackle the massive problem resulting from alcohol consumption. That has been evidenced by the Public Health England report, which has already been mentioned, that was published in December 2016 at the specific request of the former Prime Minister David Cameron. It paints a bleak picture: 10 million people are currently drinking at levels that are increasing their risk of health harm. Devastatingly, it finds that for those aged 15 to 49 in England—those of working age—alcohol is now the leading risk factor for ill health, early mortality and disability. There are now over 1 million hospital admissions relating to alcohol each year, half of which involve those in the lowest three socioeconomic deciles. Alcohol-related mortality has increased, particularly for liver disease, which has increased by 400% since 1970. We need a strategy because 167,000 years of working life were lost to alcohol in 2015. Alcohol is more likely to kill people during their working lives than many other causes of death—in other words, it causes premature deaths. Alcohol accounts for 10% of the UK's burden of disease and death, and in the past three decades there has been a threefold rise in alcohol-related deaths.

Norman Lamb: I very much share the hon. Lady's concerns about the danger of alcohol and the damage it causes to society. Does she support the case for a minimum unit price for alcohol? It could act as a deterrent, particularly to prevent young and disadvantaged people from ending up with all the consequences that flow from excess alcohol use.

Fiona Bruce: I agree. In fact, the introduction of minimum unit pricing was the very first recommendation in the 2012 strategy. The most recent review states that it “is a highly targeted measure which ensures tax increases are passed on to the consumer and improves the health of the heaviest drinkers. These people are experiencing the greatest amount of harm.”

Increasing the price of alcohol would save lives, but would not penalise moderate drinkers, so I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Public Health

[*Fiona Bruce*]

England very clearly states in its report that affordability is the lead factor in addressing health problems resulting from alcohol harm.

If I may, I will mention the issue, which again relates to cost, of white cider products, such as Frosty Jacks. They are almost exclusively drunk by the vulnerable, the young, the homeless and dependent drinkers—just the kind of people who, as I have said, need help. Just £3.50 buys a large bottle of white cider that is the equivalent of 22 shots of vodka. Time and again, homeless hostels tell us that that is what the people there drink and what, because of its high strength, causes their deaths. One of the most heartrending meetings I have attended in the House was when a mother came to talk to our all-party group about her teenage daughter. This happy, carefree young girl had gone out one night, but when she got back she told her mum that she did not feel very well. Her mum said, “Well, have a drink of water. I’ll put you to bed, and we’ll see how you are in the morning.” When her mum went into her room in the morning, she was dead. She had drunk three bottles of white cider, which means that she had drunk well over 60 shots of vodka in one evening. That is the devastation this drink can cause.

Ciders of 7.5% alcohol by volume attract the lowest duty per unit of any product, at 5p, compared with 18p per unit for beer of equivalent strength. There simply is no reason not to increase the duty on white cider and so save some of these young lives. Some 66% of the public support such a policy. It is a matter of social justice, so I ask the Minister to go back to the Treasury. I know that the former Member for Battersea looked at the issue in the last Parliament, and I ask the Minister to go back to her successor and ask for progress to save these young lives before any more families suffer as the one I have described did.

Another key intervention for an alcohol strategy is to improve the training of GPs and other people working in clinical centres, so that they can give very brief additional advice on how to prevent alcohol harm. For example, just during the few moments when someone is having their blood pressure tested, they can have a short conversation about how much alcohol they are drinking and suggest that a couple of days off a week to rest their liver would not be a bad idea. We need to pursue such improvements to prevent the kind of damage suffered by so many people in the country through excessive alcohol drinking. No one that I am aware of in our group is saying that people should not drink alcohol; this is about drinking alcohol responsibly.

I want to close by borrowing the words of our former Prime Minister in his foreword to the 2012 alcohol strategy:

“We can’t go on like this.”

He was right, but insufficient action has been taken since. Things have not improved—rather the opposite—so I call on the Government to save lives and reduce harm for us all by revising the alcohol strategy. We cannot have a successful long-term approach to substance misuse without looking at both alcohol and drugs.

2.48 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech within such an

important debate. I commend the previous speakers, hon. Members, for the eloquence with which they have delivered their strong message on the drugs debate.

I first wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Fiona Mactaggart, for her two decades of determined and dedicated service for our constituency. She, along with her predecessors, are very fondly remembered by the people of Slough for their honourable service. I will try to emulate them by becoming a hard-working MP for my constituents, because that is what Slough deserves.

Slough is a major cultural and creative hub, with one of the highest numbers of corporate and start-up companies and headquarters anywhere in the country. Slough trading estate, for instance, is the largest singly owned industrial estate, providing more than 17,000 jobs. Having run my own small start-up construction business, I appreciate how hard businesses need to work to succeed and become the engine of our economy. Home to some of the top-performing state schools in the country and with superb infrastructure links, I think hon. Members will agree with me that Slough has a very bright future. I am from the silicon valley of England.

We have a vibrant and diverse community, with Kashmiris living harmoniously side by side with Punjabis and those with Irish, Polish and African-Caribbean ancestry. Indeed, it is the world in microcosm.

However, juxtaposed with this idyllic scenario of low unemployment is the fact that we have some of the highest levels of homelessness, child obesity and malnutrition in the country. There is a lack of affordable and social housing, and that is why I need to work closely with Slough’s Labour-run council to help deliver for our residents. But we need to achieve that economic progress for all, while caring for our environment.

Slough is a town of firsts. It elected the UK’s first ever black lady mayor and now, more than three decades later, it has elected the first ever turbaned Sikh to the British Parliament—indeed, I believe, the first ever to be elected to any European Parliament. A glass ceiling has truly been broken. I sincerely hope that many more like me will follow in the years and decades to come.

The enormity of what has been collectively achieved has not escaped me. The hand of history—the huge excitement, anticipation and sheer expectations—weigh heavily on my shoulders. Among the literally thousands of good-will messages from around the globe, one individual very succinctly put it:

“I feel really happy, because finally there is someone that looks like me, sitting in Parliament.”

However, I was most overwhelmed during a recent trip up north, when an elderly gentleman walked up to me with tears streaming down his eyes and said, “I’m proud, son, because I didn’t think that I would see this in my lifetime.”

It is about a sense of belonging—when you get bullied at school for looking different, when you stand out from the crowd. It is a case of being respected and embraced by your fellow countrymen and women, including within the highest echelons of the establishment. What could demonstrate greater embrace than being elected to serve and sit on these green Benches in this august House in the mother of all Parliaments?

In addition to human rights abuses elsewhere in the world, forget being embraced, even acceptability is still a huge problem, for example in our neighbouring France.

I find it extremely disappointing and incredibly ironic that more than 80,000 turbaned Sikh soldiers died—yes, died; not injured—laid down their lives to liberate the very country where their descendants cannot even have their ID photos taken without having to remove their turbans, and cannot even send their children to most state schools without removing their turbans. This same warped interpretation of secularism precludes Muslims from wearing their hijabs and niqabs, Jews from wearing their skull caps and Christians from wearing their crosses. Acceptability is still a problem in advanced nations, such as our close ally the United States, where several Sikhs have been shot dead because of mistaken identity—mistaken for being terrorists.

The only way to fight such ignorance, to overcome the politics of hate and division, including the Islamophobia that is so prevalent in certain sections of our society and media, is to call it out and condemn it, and to espouse the politics of integration. These are not just hollow words; I believe strongly in community cohesion and integration. When I served as mayor in 2011, integration was my mayoral theme. The message that I consistently took out to our schools, our various faith groups and the wider community was that we should all be proud of our own distinct identity, whatever that may be, but that we should also be proud of our shared heritage, and for those of us who were born and brought up in Britain, are British nationals, we should also be proud to be British. I thought it was particularly pertinent that I should deliver that message, because I belong to a “minority” community.

None the less, being distinct or standing out from the crowd has its own distinct advantages. I, for one, Mr Speaker, am very much hoping that these brightly coloured turbans will act as a magnet as you repeatedly point towards the Member for Slough to make his invaluable contributions to proceedings in this House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

Whilst I am proud to be a Sikh, I will be serving in the true Sikh spirit of “sarbat da bhalla”—working for the betterment of all, regardless of background, or colour or creed. As I stand here today, I do feel immensely proud to be British; to be part of the most diverse Parliament ever, wherein more women MPs, more ethnic minorities, more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and more people with disabilities have been elected than ever before. While further work of course needs to be done by the political parties, the British public can rightly be proud of this, their achievement.

While faith, family and community have been central to my life, there is one more thing that has been pivotal in my life and will no doubt continue to guide me in the coming years—Labour values: of equality and social justice; of delivering high-quality public services; of being part of a society where we are truly in it together, looking out for and sharing with others; of solidarity, as expressed by unions of hard-working people; of co-operative and internationalist values; of free quality education, including higher education, for all; and of free quality health and social care for all, free at the point of need, the zenith of which was the formation of the NHS.

My grandfather, a retired teacher and committed socialist, explained to me at a very young age what Labour did for him and his family: “They treated us as equals and just because we have a few bob in our pockets, it does not mean that we’ll now abandon them.”

While others were busy making speeches on “rivers of blood” and trading with an apartheid Government, Labour was speaking up for people like him and standing in solidarity with black South Africans. It is very easy to pay platitudes to Nelson Mandela, a personal hero of mine, when the whole world regards him as a hero, but to stand in solidarity with him and his people when the chips are truly down takes immense courage. That is what Labour does best.

To conclude, having been born locally, when my father worked at the Langley Ford factory and my mother worked for a local petrol pump company on Farnham Road, little could they have imagined that their son—the son of immigrants—would go on to serve as the town’s MP. Indeed, little could I have imagined that my constituency office would be just a stone’s throw away from where I spent my early years on Lorne Close in Chalvey. From such humble beginnings, it is with great humility that I take on this august office. After the faith they have placed in me, I really hope to make the people of Slough proud of their MP, as I seek to serve my constituency and my country.

2.59 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi)—or, should I say, for the silicon valley of Europe?—on his excellent maiden speech. It was thoughtful and thought-provoking, and I am sure that I am joined by colleagues on both sides of the House in looking forward to his contributions in the future.

I must first declare an interest, because my husband works for a company that has a Home Office licence to grow non-psychoactive versions of cannabis to treat epileptic conditions in children. It is groundbreaking work, but I thought I should declare it, given that I will be talking about the psychoactive version of cannabis in due course—a very different substance.

I welcome the new strategy and the joined-up approach by Government to tackling the problem of drugs in our local communities and on a national and international scale. Although my hon. Friend the Minister and others were good enough to take interventions from me about my experience in the criminal courts, I share with them the hope that we can find more international solutions to tackling the problem of drugs. It is not just a problem in the United Kingdom: sadly, it is a problem that pretty much every country faces. We will have to improve our relations internationally if we are to have any chance to tackle the growers and dealers on an international scale.

As I have mentioned, before my election I worked as a criminal barrister. In my early days, that meant that I often used to defend young people afflicted with drug addictions in youth courts and magistrates courts. As I rose up the ranks, I began to prosecute high-level drug cases—the sorts of cases that are stories in the newspapers, with international drug barons who supply the first tier of the market in this country, which then disseminates the drugs regionally and eventually down to the street. It goes without saying that the tonnes of cocaine, heroin and cannabis that featured in the cases on which I worked were of a very different purity from the substances that would be bought on the street. Like any efficient—I hesitate to use that word—business model, criminals diversify. They pad out the product as much as they can to try to increase their profits.

[*Victoria Atkins*]

One of the most fascinating witnesses I have ever called in a criminal trial was the Metropolitan police's expert witness on the business of drugs. The idea that the drugs industry is run by anything other than consummate professionals—ruthless and evil, but none the less professionals—cannot be gainsaid. Like legitimate companies, these people have branding, and send out testers to their best purchasers. They are utterly ruthless in the way they sell their product, and that is why I do not share the optimism of others about tackling the problem through regulation—I will say more on that later.

The high-level criminal gangs that operate in these markets do not only import drugs. Having a method of importing drugs means having a way of importing guns and ammunition and, sadly, smuggling people in. Those drug gangs have a host of criminal behaviours to try to spot flaws in law enforcement across the European Union. They find the holes and they exploit them to make huge profits.

Other hon. Members have talked about alcohol, which creates its own harms, and I understand that. However, I urge a note of caution when comparing class A drugs to alcohol. When a drinks company legally makes an alcoholic drink, it is an efficient process with factories, licensing and so on. The reality of the drugs market—and one I fear cannot be changed—is that by definition the drugs that cause the most harm, heroin and cocaine, cannot be grown in this country, which means that they must be grown overseas in nations that tend to be poorer, such as Mexico, Colombia and Iraq.

Those drugs then have to get into this country. That happens in a variety of ways, but the most distressing for me—and it is one we should perhaps educate our young people more about—is the use of swallowers. There are various drug routes from Colombia and Mexico, and they usually pass through the Caribbean. Young people, and sometimes children, are persuaded or forced to swallow condoms full of cocaine or heroin. They are sent by air to major airports in Europe and then bounced into the United Kingdom. One has to hope beyond hope that those young people are caught by customs officials at Gatwick, Heathrow, Luton or wherever they end up, because that is their best chance. If they are caught by customs, they are taken to a customs facility with special—I am phrasing this carefully, because I am conscious this is a public sitting—lavatory facilities to enable the condoms of cocaine to leave the human body. They are watched as that happens by customs officials because, for evidential reasons, we need to know which evidence came which person. Obviously, they are in great pain as the condoms leave their bodies, because the human body is not made to pass such objects.

The lucky swallowers are caught by customs and dealt with officially—protected, I have to say—by customs officials. The worst-case scenario for the swallowers is to pass customs, meet the dealers and be taken to their headquarters. In unsanitary and unpleasant conditions, they are forced to try to pass the condoms. If they do not pass them, the dealers have a decision to make. They have as much as £50,000 of profit in a swallower's stomach—how are they to get it out? It is not pretty. They are ruthless and violent, so they use a knife to get the profit out of that person's stomach. That fact is not

often reported, which surprises me because if we could communicate to people who use cocaine that that is how it ends up in that wrap in their club or wherever they buy it, they might pause for a moment.

I know that some hon. Members will say that is why we need to regulate and take the criminals out of that market. I can understand that view, but my experience from the courts means that I do not see how we will persuade people who are ruthless enough to gut another human being like a fish to follow a law-abiding existence. Forgive me for being a beacon of pessimism, but I just do not see how we can do it.

Ronnie Cowan: What is the alternative? Do we allow them to continue to behave in that way, or stand up against them?

Victoria Atkins: That is a perfectly proper question. The only solution I have come up with—and I am a person, not a think-tank or a Home Office official—is to continue and increase our pressure on criminal gangs. We are getting better at it, but we need to work internationally with other countries. We could do more in some of the countries I have mentioned to try to remove the financial attraction of giving a field over to opium poppies.

I take that approach rather than the “let's regulate it” approach—apart from my cynicism that the dealers will withdraw from criminal activity—because of the nature of addiction. When I used to mitigate for young people in the criminal courts, I would try to explain the addiction in the following way. I think that it takes three forms. There is the physical addiction, in which the body craves the next fix. There is also the mental addiction: “How can I cope? How can I get through the day, the week, without my next fix, my few fixes?” But there is also the social addiction.

If you are in such a dark place that you are addicted to a class A substance, you will probably not be hanging out with people who are not also addicted. We know that people gather to share instruments, substances and so on. That is a social addiction, and it must be challenged. I hope that that will happen, and I am very encouraged by what I have seen in the drugs strategy. At present, when a prisoner is released from a certain prison in south London—I will not name it—the dealers line up on the avenue outside the prison saying, “Oh, hello, old friend, you are back, would you like a fix on me?” If we can break that social addiction, it will help such people to break the addiction overall.

I welcome the idea of a national recovery champion, and all the other ideas in the drugs strategy, because we are finally looking properly at the ill effects of addiction as well as the law enforcement side. However, I still strongly believe that we must focus on the criminal aspect. It is possible that, in the event of regulation or decriminalisation, some addicts would be able to make the journey to the local chemist, or wherever it might be, to pick up their doses, but I fear that the social addiction and the pressure of the dealer would still play a part. The dealer would say to the addict, “Oh, well, you may be getting your fix from the chemist or wherever, but you really want to buy your fix from me, don't you?”

Given the mental and the social addiction and the threats that dealers are quite prepared to use, I fear that there will be a black market, and there is evidence to

suggest that that would happen. We know that, sadly, when heroin users are prescribed methadone, they are not always able to withstand the enticements of their dealers. That may be partly because they want to carry on using heroin, but I worry that the regulation/decriminalisation strategy will allow the dealers to carry on dealing on the streets.

Jeff Smith: There is a black market in tobacco and there is a black market in alcohol, but most people do not obtain their tobacco and their alcohol from the black market. Is it not the case that there would be less temptation, and that over time there would be a reduction in the number of people using dealers?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because the subject of counterfeit cigarettes was next on my list. Again, I speak from personal experience. I prosecuted a criminal gang who, at the time, controlled the counterfeit cigarette market in the north of England. When the customs knocked out that gang—they did fantastically well: they got the guy at the very top as well as the distributors at the bottom—that knocked out the counterfeit cigarette market in the north of England for six months. After that, however, another gang came in and filled the vacuum. I do not have to hand the figures on usage of counterfeit cigarettes, but it is a fact that many people seek them out, not least because cigarettes are generally priced very highly—and rightly so, because we want people to stop smoking. Although I do not have the figures now, I remember reading them when I was dealing with that case. It is compelling to see many people use counterfeit cigarettes.

We know that there is also a growing market in counterfeit alcohol. In the last six months, corner shops have been warned that they need to be aware of very good reproductions of certain brands of vodka. The vodka that people may be buying in good faith from their local shop is, in fact, far more alcoholic than they would expect. I hope that, if nothing else, I am explaining my worries about how complex the position is, and demonstrating that we cannot just rely on the idea of regulation and decriminalisation.

Paul Flynn: Is the hon. Lady not impressed by the simple fact that, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), in 1971 fewer than 1,000 people in this country were addicted to heroin and cocaine, and there were virtually no deaths because those people were receiving their heroin from the health service? After 46 years of the harshest prohibition in Europe, we now have 320,000 addicts. Is it not true that prohibition creates the drug trade, creates the gangsters, and creates the deaths?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He has a long history of campaigning on this subject, which I respect. However, I am afraid that I must disagree with him. A very great deal has changed since 1971. Criminal gangs come to the United Kingdom from all over the world because the UK is much more densely populated than other countries, and they come here to sell drugs. I am sure that some Members sometimes want to turn the clock back to 1971, but I do not think we can do that. We now have to deal with the international movement of criminals and so on as it happens.

The hon. Gentleman has referred to other countries that have decriminalised drugs, and the impact that that has had on addiction rates. I know that in various American states that have decriminalised cannabis—which, obviously, is a different substance from heroin—there is evidence of a growing backlash against that decriminalisation. People may like the idea in principle, but when it comes to practicalities such as where the shop that sells the cannabis will be located in their towns—will it be the post office?—and whether advertising will be allowed near a school, they feel uncomfortable.

We need look no further than my own county. The city of Lincoln celebrated the Government's introduction of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 because it was fed up to the back teeth with having headshops all over the city. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman and I will never see eye to eye on this, but I do not think we can turn the clock back to 1971.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) cited Portugal and the number of drug deaths there. I assume that he took his figures from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, which I think contains the latest statistics. It turns out that Romania has the lowest rate of deaths through drug use, followed by Portugal, and that Bulgaria and Turkey have the third and fourth lowest rates. I do not know, but I suspect that Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey do not have liberal policies on such matters as drug use decriminalisation. I urge Members to exercise a bit of caution when looking at those statistics, because decriminalisation may not be the whole answer.

We know that the potency of the psychoactive substance in cannabis has increased from an average of about 1% in the 1960s to about 11% in 2011. What on earth does that mean? According to my research, it is equivalent to an increase from one low-alcohol beer a day to a dozen shots of vodka a day. That is quite a jump in potency. Sadly, as we know, skunk can be even stronger, with up to 30% of tetrahydrocannabinol potency. As I mentioned earlier, we see the real impact in the criminal courts: we see young offenders with mental health issues who have also used skunk on a regular basis. Those are the people I want to protect. If we can persuade fewer young people to smoke dope or take drugs, that has a benefit for them and their families, and it has a huge benefit for the local community. We all know of the role that drugs play in onward crimes, committed to fund the next drugs purchase.

I am conscious that I have taken a long time and we have a very exciting maiden speech on its way. Although the international debate on how to deal with drugs continues, it is essential that the Government set out a strategy for what we do at home. I am really impressed by this drug strategy. I welcome in particular the introduction of a national recovery champion. It is a good idea to have someone looking over good and not so good practice. We may not agree on decriminalisation, but I am sure we all agree that healthcare must form part of the drug strategy. We have to be able to look after addicts to help them to get rid of their addiction. None the less, I am still a firm believer that law enforcement plays a vital role here and internationally in stopping the drug barons profiting from this terrible industry. I will support the Government in their efforts to stop it.

3.21 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on a really excellent speech? It was a privilege to be here for the first maiden speech by a brightly coloured turbaned Sikh. I am looking forward to a number of maiden speeches today. In my own maiden speech two years ago, I said among other things that I looked forward to arguing for reform of our drug laws. There has been very little chance to do so since then, so I welcome the debate today. However, unfortunately, the Government's new drug strategy is a massive missed opportunity.

We do not get a new strategy very often. There is always the hope that it might contain some radical thinking. This strategy, sadly, offers little that is new. It is more of the same approach that is not working, that has seen an increase in drug-related deaths in the UK and that sees the UK responsible for nearly a third of Europe's drug deaths.

My friend Cara's son is five tomorrow. It will be his third birthday without his father Jake, who died of a heroin overdose. Cara wants to legalise drugs to end the stigma around drug use and to end the unnecessary criminalisation of drug users that made it so hard for her family to deal with Jake's addiction, and makes it more difficult for people to seek help with drug problems.

The day after tomorrow, Thursday, will be the fourth anniversary of the death of 15-year-old Martha Cockburn, who died after taking ecstasy that turned out to be 91% pure; as a result, she died of an accidental overdose. Martha's mum, Anne-Marie, who I think is in the Public Gallery, now campaigns for the legalisation and regulation of ecstasy, among other drugs. Martha died because there was no controlling measures on the substance that killed her and no way for Martha to check the safety of the substance she was using. Martha was failed by our approach to drug policy.

Many people who have been touched by the loss of loved ones want a more measured debate and a more rational approach to drug policy. Fifty people a week are dying of drug-related deaths in the UK—50 Marthas and Jakes. Our first duty in this place has to be to try to keep people safe and we are failing. The biggest missed opportunity in this strategy is the fact that we have not even considered decriminalisation or legalisation of some drugs as a solution to the problem. We have heard a number of times about Portugal, which decriminalised the use of drugs in 2001. Its drug-induced death rate is five times lower than the EU average. It had 16 overdose deaths last year and there has been a massive reduction in HIV infections.

In an article last week on the publication of the strategy, the Home Secretary said:

"We owe it to future generations to work together for a society free of drugs."

Talk of a society free of drugs is a dangerous fantasy. Humans have taken drugs for thousands of years and are not going to stop because the Home Secretary produces a new strategy. It is a dangerous fantasy because it diverts attention and resources from the real challenge, which is how we make drug taking safer, how we educate users, how we reduce the consumption of dangerous drugs, how we take control of the drug trade from the criminals who want to exploit vulnerable

users, and how we stop criminalising thousands of people unnecessarily. Many people are being criminalised because they have a medical or psychological problem. We need to recognise the link between early childhood trauma, including abuse, and addiction in later life. It is a closer link than that between obesity and diabetes. Drug addiction is often a psychological or biological problem, and criminalising people who have those problems is not the answer. In other cases, we are criminalising people unnecessarily for using a relatively harm-free intoxicant.

The best example is cannabis. It is surely wrong that we criminalise people for using a substance less dangerous than tobacco or alcohol—a substance that the overwhelming majority of people find pleasant, relatively harm-free and even a rewarding experience to take. We have all-party parliamentary groups that extol the virtues of beer, wine and whisky, but when we talk about a substance that is less harmful than alcohol, we are not allowed to say that it can be a positive experience.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, but I regret to say that he is wrong in one particular regard. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has made it crystal clear that cannabis is an extremely dangerous drug that can be a gateway to mental health difficulties. Does he not agree that, if we were to decriminalise it, it would send a dangerous message to young people that cannabis is somehow safe? Nothing could be further from the truth.

Jeff Smith: No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, because I do not think that is the evidence and I do not think that is the message. There is a host of evidence through the years that cannabis is far less dangerous than alcohol.

Norman Lamb: Is not the problem that when one is buying in the criminal market one has no idea what one is buying? One could be buying a very heavy strain, whereas if we regulate we have control over the potency of the substance that we are trying to control.

Jeff Smith: That is absolutely right. We talked earlier about the use of skunk, which has very high THC content. If one were to regulate the cannabis market, one could balance the THC and CBD elements of the product and make it safer for people.

Stephen Pound: My hon. Friend is making an informed statement. Does he agree that cannabis sativa and cannabis indica are totally different from the skunk that we have discussed? The experience in the western United States is that one can have a perfectly civilised purchasing system for cannabis sativa and cannabis indica. May I possibly appeal to the more avaricious elements on the Government Benches, as that is a vast revenue stream of taxation, which surely should delight even their dark hearts?

Jeff Smith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He knows it, and I suspect that very many Members in this House know it—far more than are represented here today. I think plenty on the Government side know it, too, and perhaps even the Home Secretary knows it but, because of the toxic climate of the debate around drug policy, we are not able to say so.

If we legalised and regulated cannabis, we would take it out of the hands of the dealers, and reduce the opportunities for them to tempt users into experimenting with more dangerous drugs. We would also regulate the product, so users know with confidence what they are getting, so people who are worried about high levels of THC do not have to take whatever they can get on the street. There is a bonus too: we would raise many millions of pounds for the Exchequer to spend, if that is what we desire, on drug education or the NHS.

Around the world, countries recognise that cannabis prohibition is failing, and many of them are regulating. Uruguay was the first to do so. Eight states in the US, representing 20% of the population, have now legalised and regulated. Next year, Canada should become the first G7 country to do it. It is time we did the same. My personal belief is that this is going to happen. It is inevitable that it is going to happen in this country; we just need to grasp the nettle and do it.

We desperately need to change the terms of the debate. We need more openness and honesty in discussion of drug policy, and we need to reduce the stigma around taking drugs so that families find it easier to discuss the problem and find help. We need to stop the pretence that everyone's experience of illegal drugs is negative.

In my previous life, I worked as a DJ and an event manager in the music industry, so I spent a lot of time working and socialising in nightclubs, being around people who used recreational drugs. Many thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of ecstasy pills are taken every week in the UK, and we cannot pretend in our public discourse that people who are taking drugs do it because it is a terrible, miserable experience; people will not believe us, and it will destroy the credibility of the message. We need an honest and rational debate around drug policy if users, especially young people, are going to take us seriously.

Most of all, we need to focus on policies that minimise harm and risk to users, and that requires looking at different approaches to harm reduction. That is where this strategy is disappointing. The Government have ignored the chance to do that by looking at interventions that can save lives—at drug consumption rooms for heroin users, at heroin prescribing, at pill testing—and we need a much stronger emphasis on educational solutions if people are caught breaking what is currently the law.

If I get caught speeding in my car, I am sent on a course to teach me to drive more carefully. Those courses have a high success rate. If I am driving a speeding car, I have the potential to do much more harm to society than if I am caught in possession of cannabis or ecstasy for personal use, but the latter is a criminal offence, with the potential for a damaging criminal record, and the former a civil offence. There is no reason not to treat drug possession for personal use in the same way.

I want to say a few brief words about medicinal cannabis. Although it is not really covered in this strategy, we looked at it last year in the all-party group for drug policy reform. There is overwhelming evidence that cannabis is a useful treatment for a range of conditions. In some cases, people find relief in cannabis, having exhausted treatments that have failed. Some people may have seen an article in the *Daily Mail* recently that asked whether a woman should be criminalised for medicating

with cannabis. When even the *Daily Mail* accepts that there is an argument for change, that surely illustrates how far behind public opinion the House is on the issue. We should follow many countries, as well as half the states in the USA, and legalise cannabis for medicinal use.

Finally, I want to mention resourcing. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary said earlier, passing responsibility for drug treatment to local authorities was a good idea in practice. However, there is a huge problem for local authorities that commission addiction services because of the massive cuts to local authority budgets.

Some drugs are dangerous, and we need to get drugs under control, but I do not want those words to be misinterpreted; I do not mean that we need to ban the use of drugs. The production, retail and use of some drugs needs to be controlled, so people can use drugs safely if they choose to do so. Prohibition is not working in the UK or around the world. We need a new approach. We need to treat addiction as a health issue. We need to stop criminalising people unnecessarily. We need to begin considering proper, evidence-based strategies. We certainly need to move towards legalising cannabis, and I believe that that is only a matter of time. We also need to look seriously at the decriminalisation of other drugs.

I have spoken today not because I think I am going to secure a massive change in the Government's drug policy; indeed, I do not expect any quick progress on drug policy. I just think we need to start reframing the debate. There are a limited number of us who are prepared to speak up on this issue at present, but I hope the numbers will gradually increase, because we need a serious debate on this issue, not more of the same approach, which has failed.

3.34 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I have been very pleased to listen to some excellent and well-informed speeches today, particularly the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). It is an absolute honour to be able to make my maiden speech and to represent the people of Stoke-on-Trent South in this place. Stoke-on-Trent is the city that I grew up in and where I have lived my whole life. Nothing could make me prouder than serving the people of Stoke-on-Trent South in Parliament.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Rob Flello. I thank him for his commitment to Stoke-on-Trent South over the past 12 years. He will be remembered as a dedicated community activist in Stoke-on-Trent and was respected here for his campaigning on a number of national concerns, particularly those relating to the road haulage industry, in which he played an active role.

Stoke-on-Trent is a unique place with a strong cultural identity. It is a city founded on its industrial heritage, with those industries now resurgent and a hotbed of innovation. The potteries were born out of industry and our culture flows from that. Stoke-on-Trent is also known well for its unique cultural dialect. I thought about giving my maiden speech in a traditional potteries dialect, but I feared that it might prove impossibly challenging for *Hansard* and for hon. and right hon. Members. However, I hope that they will indulge me for just one short line. It is time that this question was

[Jack Brereton]

asked in the House: cost kick a bow agen' a woe, y'ed it back an bost it? I know that, in answer to that question, the players of Stoke City football club—whose home is the bet365 stadium in my constituency—would have no problem t bost a bo.

Stokies are especially known for their friendliness, and many visitors to the city remark on how welcoming the local people are. What makes us most distinctive, however, is our geographical make-up, following the coming together in 1910 of six different, individual towns to form one body. Two of those towns, Fenton and Longton, are in my constituency. However, we did not gain city status until 1925, in what was a rare modern occurrence of royal intervention in which the monarch countermanaged the Government. Having initially been refused city status by the Home Office, Stoke-on-Trent made a direct approach to His Majesty King George V and became a city on 4 June 1925.

Surrounding the pottery towns of Fenton and Longton, my Stoke-on-Trent South constituency includes a diverse slice of north Staffordshire. We have the only grade 1 listed building in Stoke-on-Trent, the Trentham Mausoleum, which is the final resting place of the Dukes of Sutherland. They were significant philanthropists in the area, particularly in Longton, Normacot and Dresden, giving land and paying for many of the important public buildings and facilities that we see today. They include the fantastic Queen's Park, the first public pleasure park in the Potteries, which was opened to commemorate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. It was once a lone oasis in an otherwise smog-filled urban area, but today we are one of the greenest cities in the country, with more than 1,380 hectares of parks and open space. One of the most important natural sites, Park Hall country park, is in Weston Coyney in my constituency. It is a site of special scientific interest and the only national nature reserve in Stoke-on-Trent.

Where once stood thousands of bottle ovens in Stoke-on-Trent, only 47 now remain. They are protected, of course, and I am pleased to say that half of those iconic structures are in my constituency, with the largest number in Longton. My constituency has no shortage of first-rate architectural gems, both old and new. Many of these important historical sites have now been converted, with a number becoming enterprise centres to host thriving small businesses. They include the Sutherland Institute, St James's House, CoRE and now also Fenton Town Hall, which has been reborn as a centre for business and industry by the grandson of the original builder and benefactor, William Meath Baker. There is a tremendous spirit of resourcefulness and renewal in my constituency, and it gives me great optimism that so many of our heritage landmarks will continue to find new uses in a new age.

My constituency is well connected by road and rail, as well as being within an hour's drive of four international airports. Sadly, the Meir aerodrome is no longer in operation. It opened in 1934 as Staffordshire's first municipal airport and closed in the 1970s. It has now been redeveloped to form the Meir Park residential estate. When the aerodrome was still in use, people might have seen my constituency from above, stretching from the regenerated industrial heartlands of Longton and Fenton, right across to the surrounding suburban

communities of Trentham, Blurton, Weston Coyney and Meir—a mixture of different communities that I am so proud to represent.

Stoke-on-Trent has been a global city, designing wares and products to fit every taste and market. We have been exporting and trading products around the world for centuries, and that has never been more true and important than it is today. We have some of the most advanced steel manufacturing in the world. Just like pottery, steel manufacturing has strong roots in Stoke-on-Trent. Goodwin International, which is based in my constituency, is a world leader in mechanical engineering, producing some of the most intricate steel components, both large and small. It works in partnership with Goodwin Steel Castings in neighbouring Stoke-on-Trent Central, which has been producing machined castings since 1883—one of the 10 oldest companies listed on the stock exchange. Goodwin's products are of the highest standard and are used right around the world in energy production, bridge construction and armed forces equipment.

Today in Stoke-on-Trent our industries are becoming more diverse and more innovative than ever before. Rated nationally as the second-best place to start a new business, it is the No. 1 city for business survival and the ninth-fastest growing economy in the UK. Productivity has increased by over 25% since 2010. It is ranked fourth for employment growth and has one of the fastest-growing housing markets, and our big ceramics businesses have increased production by over 50%.

People are waking up to what Stoke-on-Trent has to offer as one of the best connected places. We have kept ahead of the digital curve with some of the best broadband connectivity, and we are rated as having the best 4G download speeds in the country, not only making Stoke-on-Trent a key hub for some of the leading brands in distribution and logistics, but putting the city at the forefront of a revolution in digital and advanced manufacturing.

Our clay-based industries in particular have become more diverse and are expanding into new sectors. Whether healthcare, tourism, high-tech materials or construction, ceramic products are becoming ever more essential in the modern world. That has been exemplified by recent investment in the Wedgwood factory and visitor centre in my constituency. The fully refurbished factory site manufactures some of the finest wares in the world, and the World of Wedgwood visitor centre is a must see for any tourist. Most recently, we have seen the opening of the brand-new Valentine Clays facility in Fenton, which is continuing the growth of the industry and supplying clay and raw materials to potters around the country.

Our growing economy and industry are supported by strong academic institutions. Staffordshire University is now rated one of the best nationally for some of its digital courses, such as gaming. We also have Keele University—I should declare an interest in that my wife and I are both Keele graduates—which is renowned nationally for its academic strength and has won numerous awards for the quality of its academia, including being ranked top nationally for student experience and student satisfaction and most recently being awarded gold in the teaching excellence framework. Importantly, the universities play an active part in the community and economy of north Staffordshire and have a critical role in the innovation and development of our local industries.

The businesses and people who have invested in Stoke-on-Trent South are rightly proud of what we have achieved. As their strong voice in Parliament, I am determined to work to create better jobs that will spread the net of opportunity wider. Critical to that will be securing the best possible deal from leaving the European Union, guaranteeing trade and ensuring ease of access to markets throughout the world. That is what people in Stoke-on-Trent South overwhelmingly voted for in the referendum and what people were saying to me on the doorstep during the general election campaign. I will be calling on the Government to advance trade agreements around the world as part of a more global Britain that supports businesses in Stoke-on-Trent South to sell their products abroad. This is about creating prosperity for every household in Stoke-on-Trent South, driving up skills and increasing local people's wages. We need to see not just more jobs in Stoke-on-Trent South but better jobs that pay higher wages and take full advantage of the talent that Stokies have.

In my time in the House I will be a strong advocate for measures that support industry and fulfil the promise of the Government's industrial strategy to rebalance the national economy. This includes the development of a place-based industrial strategy that works for the potteries. We need to see investment in our infrastructure that ensures businesses in Stoke-on-Trent can continue to thrive and local people are not blighted by sitting in daily traffic jams. It will mean improving our transport network to be fit for the future, improving rail and road connections to my constituency to help address congestion and ensuring that we see better local rail services to Longton station and improved connectivity to Stoke-on-Trent from across the country.

For our industries to grow and create the jobs we need locally, we must also ensure greater energy security, with infrastructure that matches the needs of our manufacturing sectors. As a city made up of towns, we need to ensure that our town centres are healthy and that our high streets remain relevant to the local communities they serve. I want to see Longton and Fenton town centres become stronger, with new housing and businesses moving in. Those are my priorities as Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent South.

I began by speaking of our heritage and culture in Stoke-on-Trent. I could not be more delighted that our city has been shortlisted for UK city of culture 2021. Stoke-on-Trent is the world capital of ceramics, which is an industry and art that has not only shaped my constituency but has left its stamp on our national culture. Many Stokies, like me, are proud of the products we see around the world that are back-stamped "Made in Stoke-on-Trent" and "Made in Britain." A Stokie can often be spotted apart turning over a plate or a mug to check where it was made.

The Palace of Westminster, like many of the greatest buildings across the country, is filled with products manufactured in Stoke-on-Trent. From the tableware to the Minton tile floors, each piece is an ambassador for Stoke-on-Trent. I was a little disappointed to find that the ongoing floor restoration works in Central Lobby are using tiles manufactured in Jackfield, Shropshire. However, I was reassured to discover that the powder used to produce these fantastic tiles is sourced from Stoke-on-Trent.

I can think of no city that better celebrates its culture and heritage, or whose cultural identity and ambition

are so closely bound up with its industry and commerce. I think of the multitudes who flock to the many museums and factory shops to learn about our industries and buy Stoke-on-Trent products. Gladstone Pottery Museum in my constituency gives the true experience of a Victorian pottery factory.

I think of the unparalleled collection housed at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, including one of only four surviving vases thrown by Josiah Wedgwood in 1769 on the first day of opening his factory, which started the industrial revolution in the potteries. Recently rescued from private sale and export, the vase will now be on display again for people to visit and enjoy.

I think of our several locally and nationally important theatres; I think of our music venues, our restaurants, our parks, canals and open spaces; I think of a city of culture and picture Stoke-on-Trent, where creativity and culture have always been critical to our economic and social progress; and, of course, I think of the famous Staffordshire oatcakes, which I encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to try from one of the many local oatcake shops when they get the chance to visit.

There is so much that is culturally unique about Stoke-on-Trent, and winning this bid would help continue the revival of Stoke-on-Trent as a vibrant and innovative core of the UK economy. It will be an absolute pleasure to back the city of culture bid as Stoke-on-Trent South's MP and to campaign for my constituents to win that recognition in 2021.

This debate is about drugs policy. The use of psychoactive substances in particular is increasing, which is ruining lives and is a significant cause of crime on our streets. That not only affects police services but puts pressure on our national health service, which has to deal with much of the human cost of drug abuse.

Far too many ordinary people in my constituency have felt the impacts of drug use and told me they do not feel safe in our communities. I will be working with Staffordshire police and Matthew Ellis, our police and crime commissioner, to ensure that we continue to see drug use decline and we act against the associated crimes. Much progress is being made by local partners and communities; putting in place a public space protection order in Longton has made a big difference. I have particularly seen the fantastic work put in by volunteers such as Street Chaplains locally in my constituency. Significant work has been done to help ensure people feel safe and welcome when visiting the town centre, and in directing people who need help to get the right support.

Often the misuse of drugs can be linked to mental health problems, and I have been pleased to see Staffordshire leading the way to ensure that people with mental health problems get better support. Local services, the police and the voluntary sector continue to work more closely in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire to help people get better support to tackle addictions and change their lifestyles. I want to play my part in ensuring that we continue to tackle these issues in our communities, so we continue to see drug-related crimes reduced and people with addictions get the right support.

3.50 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I congratulate the new hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on his excellent maiden speech. He told of the multitude

[*Ian C. Lucas*]

travelling to Stoke. The last multitude to travel to Stoke from Wrexham was for the FA cup match a few years ago. Wrexham led for a glorious five minutes, but unfortunately it did not end well. His was a wonderful speech that did end well, and I wish him the best for his future in the House.

This debate is about the Government's new drugs policy. I have considered in detail the drugs strategy that was published last week. I found it rather disappointing. I was pleased that it was produced and I am glad the Government are looking at the issue seriously, but we face a real crisis in our drugs strategy. Interestingly, we heard from the hon. Gentleman about new psychoactive substances, which are a major issue in my constituency. The shadow Home Secretary made an apposite point earlier, because it is clear that the decline in resources available for both our police service and our local authorities has had a major impact on the problem of drugs in our communities. In 2010, I saw a police service working with local authorities to provide an excellent law and order policy—one that the Labour party had built up in the 13 years from 1997 to create true community policing. It created a safety valve so that when issues arose they were identified early and we began to address them. In the past seven years, there has been a real decline in the quality of our criminal justice system and in drugs policy on the streets.

I do not have the certainties on decriminalisation of many speakers in this debate, and in many respects I envy them. Before I was a Member of Parliament, I was a solicitor and in the 1980s I worked in Birkenhead. As a defence solicitor, I represented many young heroin addicts. That convinced me profoundly of the danger of drugs and the horrific impact they can have on not only the individuals concerned, but their families. I tread very warily indeed if any sort of message is presented that it is okay to take drugs, because I have seen the very negative impact.

I understand what the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said in his very eloquent speech. I also listened carefully to the many interventions that have been made and to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), but I am struggling to know the right way ahead. I would not be resistant to a royal commission because NPS is out of control in my community. It affects not just Wrexham, but Manchester and many towns up and down the country. The legislation is not working properly.

In discussions with police officers, I have been told: that it is not possible effectively to arrest people for taking NPS because it is not clear what substance they have taken; that it is too expensive to have the substances tested; and that people are receiving penalties for possession of a class B drug that have no effective outcome and no impact on preventing reoffending. That is creating a major public order problem in our constituencies. It is currently not being addressed, and I cannot see how this document and this strategy will either solve the problem or stop it getting worse.

Paul Flynn: Does my hon. Friend recall the passage of the Psychoactive Substances Bill last year? It was said to be modelled on similar Bills that had been passed in Ireland and in Poland? In both countries, prohibition of psychoactive substances increased use—

in Ireland from 16% to 22%—and increased harm. Is it not true that, in this country, it is very easy to close the headshops, but that we increase the problem, increase the number of users and increase the number of deaths?

Ian C. Lucas: Yes, it is a continuing and increasing problem, but it was a problem before the Act was passed. This is a difficult issue with no easy solution. The Act has already had to be amended to reclassify the drug, and to make possession an offence. Initially, that was not the case, and there were problems with effective enforcement. People who had clearly taken these substances and were in a poor condition as a result could not be arrested because they had not committed an offence; they were simply in possession of the drug in question. The law has already had to be amended. I believe a review is due under the Act at the beginning of 2018, but it should be done immediately. I raised this with the Minister at questions a couple of weeks ago, and she said that the measure was working well, when clearly it is not. I was really worried by that response.

On Sunday, I was contacted by a constituent who had been terrified in the centre of the town because of the conduct of some people affected by the drug. It is an urgent issue that must be addressed now. As it stands, the drugs strategy is not addressing the matter properly. Part of the reason is that local authorities and the police do not have the capacity and understanding to deal with it. I am not sure that they are really clear about the correct approach. We need an intelligent conversation about the nature of the problem.

We also need to find out about the individuals who are taking these substances, because each one has their own story and their own life. It is clear that they have chosen to take these substances, but that choice is having a massive impact on other people and other communities because of the way that they behave. I would like to know how they pay for these items, and to understand the role of the Department for Work and Pensions, because some people are using their benefits to buy these substances. I see a lot of people in my constituency office who are having their benefits taken away from them, but who cannot walk into the surgery. A sanction seems to be applied to them, but not to people who choose to take substances in the centre of my community. The Department for Work and Pensions—the largest-spending Department—has not been mentioned so far, but it needs to be involved, so that we can find out what role it plays when individuals to whom it pays benefits take these substances.

I wanted to restrict my observations to new psychoactive substances, but before I stop I should like to mention the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), which I found deeply moving. The first Sikh I remember as a child was Bishan Bedi, who had even better turbans than my hon. Friend, but my hon. Friend can try harder. I was touched by his reference to his parents; I do not know whether they are still with us, but they will be very proud of his achievements. In my maiden speech, I talked about a boy of 14 who was in court with 24 burglaries against his name because he was a heroin addict. I represented him in 1988.

My speech has a lot more questions than answers, but I do not think that we have made much progress on drugs policy since I came to the House in 2001. We have had an interesting debate today. We very much needed

to look at the issue again, but there is a real, immediate problem with NPS that the Government need to address urgently, and I implore them to take it more seriously.

4.1 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech during this important debate.

Since arriving in Parliament, I have spent the past few weeks being greeted with the now familiar phrase, “Ah, so you’re the new Alan Johnson, are you?” Despite the obvious and not quite so obvious differences between us, that is something that I am very proud to be. Alan Johnson was the MP for Hull West and Hessle for over 20 years, and he built a formidable and proud reputation as a national political figure, but, most importantly for the people of Hull West and Hessle, Alan was a well-respected local MP who worked hard to represent the people who elected him to this House. Notably, Alan worked tirelessly to rectify the appalling injustice and hardships suffered by the trawlermen of Hull and their families. This righting of wrongs earned him the ever-lasting respect and admiration of the city.

Alan’s life story is a journey from absolute poverty to high office. It is a story of triumph over adversity. This is all well documented in his autobiographies. He would not want me to miss an opportunity to mention that if hon. Members are interested in reading more about his life, his three autobiographies are available in all good bookshops.

My path has been different from Alan’s, but I am incredibly proud to have also come from a strong trade unionist background. I am proud to have been a primary teacher. I have never worked for an MP and I have not come from a family of politicians. My journey has been paved by my desire to right wrongs. Every one of us has made sacrifices to be here, and so have all our families—particularly my two wonderful daughters, Olivia and Isabelle. But it is a sacrifice that must be made because politics cannot be the preserve of the rich, powerful and privileged.

Back in 2011, when I first started campaigning against the changes to education, I was told that my opinion was unimportant because I was only a part-time infant school teacher, but in the words of the Dalai Lama,

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”

I am honoured to be a patron of The Warren in Hull, which gives support to marginalised and vulnerable young people. I would love it if my legacy was to have encouraged and inspired many other people who had also been told that their opinion did not matter to get involved in politics, because everybody matters equally.

I have heard many maiden speeches in which people have talked of the beauty of their constituency, but what makes a place is not the rolling hills, the lakes or the skyscrapers. What makes a place beautiful is the people who live there, and that is why Hull West and Hessle is the best place to live, and why I am so honoured to be their Member of Parliament and represent them.

It is not a stereotype to say that people from the north are friendly and compassionate; it is quite simply a statement of fact. But never mistake friendliness and compassion for weakness. Charles I learned not to

underestimate the people of Hull when he was turned away from the city in 1642, leading to the siege of Hull, which was a major step on the road to the English civil war. Nor did anyone underestimate one of Hull’s other famous sons, William Wilberforce, in his tireless fight to end slavery; or, more recently, the “headscarf revolutionaries,” a group of women from Hull who took on the establishment in the 1960s to improve safety in the trawler industry.

This is an incredible year for Hull, because we are the city of culture. Let me take this opportunity to extend a welcome to everybody to come back to ours and experience it for themselves. As an infant teacher, I used to give my pupils an historical tour of the city, pointing out the evidence of our fishing heritage, our magnificent 13th century minster and our beautiful architecture, so if Members come up I’ll even throw in a free tour. This weekend Hull is hosting the national UK Pride event, and I am delighted to be involved. Good luck to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) in his task of trying to get Stoke-on-Trent the city of culture.

I am also incredibly proud to represent Hessle, which is the town where I live and where my girls attend school. It is most famously known for the Humber bridge, which just this week has been given grade I listed status, but I also highly recommend the Hessle feast.

Since it was as an infant teacher that I became politicised, it will come as no surprise to anyone that I want to focus the House’s attention on education and speak during this important debate on drugs. There must be a drugs education programme as part of a wider personal, social and health education to keep our children safe. But PSHE, like so many arts subjects, is being pushed out because of the high-stakes accountability in our schools. There is no point having a drugs education programme if there is no time to teach it. Some parents can compensate for the narrowing of the curriculum by paying for music, dance, art, drama or sports clubs, but many cannot. We are wasting the talents and abilities of so many of our children because of the failed way we judge schools.

That pressure that schools face is manifesting itself as pressure on our children. Now, the Prime Minister thinks that schools can solve the mental health crisis facing our children, but it has been contributed to by her Government’s system of educational assessment. We should not be making our schools into learning factories that churn out compliant, unquestioning units for work. We want our children to be creative, to question, to inquire, to explore and to think independently, especially in this era of fake news. We are discussing the reform of drugs law without asking ourselves: if we only ever teach our children to obey adults unquestioningly, how can they ever understand when they should not?

Education provided my father with his route out of poverty, and it was the route for his three brothers too. My dad left education with next to nothing in the way of qualifications, and it was through evening classes and further education that he went on to become a local primary headteacher. The under-investment in FE is denying people that second chance. Some 31% of children in Hull live in poverty, and I do not think that it is right for any child’s life story to be determined by birth. But with the cuts facing Hull College, Sure Start and all of education, how can we say that we are giving our young people today those same opportunities and second chances?

[*Emma Hardy*]

It is not just the FE sector that is suffering; it is all of education. While I welcome the recent announcement of extra funding, it is not enough. Inflation and other factors mean that schools still face real-terms cuts to their budgets, and those cuts are driving up class sizes, reducing the number of teaching assistants, increasing the number of unqualified teachers and reducing the curriculum options available.

One of the crucial lessons in life, which everyone across all these Benches has learnt, is that when you fall down, you have to pick yourself back up again. But I know that I can do that because I am lucky: I have two brilliant parents who are always there for me. But we are selling a lie if we do not acknowledge how much harder it is for some people. It is like telling them that it is a fair fight, when they start with both hands tied behind their backs and already on the ground.

That is why I am fighting for fairer funding for Hull City Council, which has seen its core spending power cut by 32% since 2010. It cannot invest in those services to really help people have that fair start and equal chance, when all it is doing is managing year-on-year cuts. All these drugs education programmes need proper funding too, if we want them to be successful.

This Government's political choices to cut benefits—especially to disabled people—to under-invest in education and our NHS and to deny our public sector workers a pay rise are making people in Hull West and Hessle suffer. I am here to represent everyone in Hull West and Hessle: not just those who voted for me and not just those on the electoral roll. I want to be the voice for everyone, and I will hold the Government to account for their decisions. I stand here with my colleagues on the Opposition Benches to say that there is an alternative. Austerity is a political choice—one that I will always choose to oppose.

4.10 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (*Emma Hardy*) on an immensely impressive maiden speech. I confess that I am quite a fan of her predecessor's—I have not said that until now—but I am now also clearly a fan of the hon. Lady, who, like the other two Members who have made maiden speeches today, spoke incredibly powerfully. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) gave a powerful and moving speech, and I am just glad I was here to witness it. I thank him.

This has been a fascinating debate, in which there have been more voices for reform than I have heard before; I am particularly encouraged by what the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said. I will come to my thoughts on reform in a moment, but I want to start by acknowledging that there are important things in the Government's drugs strategy.

I welcome the shift away from an over-emphasis on abstinence, which in many respects was damaging. I also welcome a focus on evidence-based drug treatment programmes and on addressing the underlying causes of addiction, whether poor housing or mental health issues. I acknowledge those good things. I also welcome the references to drug rehabilitation requirements as a sentencing option along with alcohol rehabilitation requirements and mental health treatment requirements.

That is a sensible innovation. I note the preparation of a protocol to ensure good access to treatment and the potential for a maximum waiting time, which all make sense.

However, although the mental health treatment requirements, introduced by the last Labour Government, were a very good policy response, they were virtually never used across the country. Organising mental health treatment services alongside the criminal justice system has proved to be beyond most parts of the country, and I do not want the same to happen with drug and alcohol orders. It is really important that the Government focus on making sure that all three of those sentencing options are available everywhere to ensure that when it comes to offences of which the underlying cause is an addiction or mental health problem, the person gets access to treatment and not just punishment. That is incredibly important.

I want to focus on two key objections. The first has been mentioned by other hon. Members: the cut in public health funding. Frankly, that makes no sense at all. If we are to ensure that the NHS as a whole is more sustainable, we have to shift resources to prevention, not cut the funding available, which is completely counter-productive. In a report published just last week, the King's Fund highlighted the fact that across the country councils have planned expenditure cuts to really important public health programmes: sexual health clinics as well as programmes reducing harm from smoking, alcohol and drugs. A total of £85 million is involved. The spend on tackling drug misuse for adults involves a planned cut of £22 million, or 5.5%. It totally undermines the Government's strategy, which, in any case, I disagree with, to be cutting funding from the treatment programmes that can help people to recover. Unless the Government seek to address that, they will fail in their objective.

My second objection is far more fundamental: it relates to the philosophy behind the Government's approach to drug use. Instinctively, I am hostile to drugs. As the father of two boys, now in their 20s, I get really anxious at the thought of my children—our children—taking drugs, or, indeed, engaging in excessive use of alcohol or smoking. Let us remember, in all the talk about harm from drugs, that smoking, which involves a legal product, kills 100,000 people in our country every year. There is no consistency in Government policy at all, and that is simply not good enough. My starting point is not to advocate a free-for-all but to find an effective approach to the use of drugs that seeks to reduce harm. Surely that is what we should all be searching for. However, the Government's approach and that of successive Governments—indeed, that of much of the western world—amounts to a monumental failure of public policy. We need a fundamentally new approach.

The Royal Society for Public Health, in its response to the Government's strategy, says that it

“falls far short of the fundamental reorientation of policy towards public health and away from criminal justice needed to tackle rising drug harm. Decriminalisation of drug possession and use is a critical enabler that would enable drug treatment services to reach as many people as possible as effectively as possible. Instead, the Government still continues to lead with unhelpful rhetoric about ‘tough law enforcement’ that contributes to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable drug users”.

If the Government are interested in ensuring that they follow the right approach, surely they should be listening very carefully to those experts in public health.

The *British Medical Journal* editorial from November last year makes an incredibly important point, saying that “the effectiveness of prohibition laws, colloquially known as the ‘war on drugs’, must be judged on outcomes”—what is actually achieved. It continues:

“And too often the war on drugs plays out as a war on the millions of people who use drugs, and disproportionately”—this is a really important point—“on people who are poor or from ethnic minorities and on women.”

If the effect of the Government’s policy is as it says in the *British Medical Journal*, then surely the Government need to think again. The editorial also says:

“All wars cause human rights violations, and the war on drugs is no different. Criminally controlled drug supply markets lead to appalling violence—causing an estimated 65 000–80 000 deaths in Mexico in the past decade”.

That is an extraordinary death toll that surely we should not ignore.

I want to focus on the number of people who die through drug misuse. We heard earlier that a third of such deaths in Europe are in the UK. Ten families are bereaved every single day as a result of drug use. That could be a loved one of any of us in this Chamber. If we think that official Government policy is perhaps contributing to that—and I argue that it is—we need to think again. In 2015, the number of deaths was up by more than 10%. The previous year it had risen by more than 14%, and the year before that by nearly 20%. That is a shocking failure of official policy. Deaths from heroin doubled between 2012 and 2015.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): One interesting way of reducing harm from intravenous drug use—particularly heroin, which the right hon. Gentleman just mentioned—is the use of safe and hygienic facilities for intravenous drug users in a non-stigmatising environment. Glasgow is piloting that solution in the city, and perhaps it is worth noting as an option that we should look at and consider the results of with interest.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I was going to mention that solution in a moment. Let me quote Anne-Marie Cockburn—she has been mentioned in the debate—from the Anyone’s Child project:

“I invite the Prime Minister to come and stand by my daughter’s grave, and tell me her approach to drugs is working.”

That is a parent who lost their daughter as a result of the current approach to drug policy.

The claim in the strategy that the increase in the number of deaths relates to a problem of ageing drug users simply will not wash. The same demographic is replicated across Europe, including in Portugal, but the increase in deaths is not, and we have to ask why. The number of deaths per 100,000 of population in the UK is 10 times that in Portugal. I appreciated the Minister’s statement that she would listen carefully to what I said, and I hold her in high regard as well, but when our death rate is 10 times that of Portugal, which has chosen, incidentally, an approach that commands cross-party support in the country, from left to right, surely she should stop and listen. Surely she should investigate further Portugal’s approach, which has resulted in such a reduction in the number of deaths from drug use.

In 2015, 1,573 people died of a heroin overdose in this country. That is shameful. In the past, those people might have been dismissed as victims of their own stupidity, but we can no longer accept such thinking. These are people. They are citizens of our country, and they are losing their lives. They would not have died if they had had access to the treatment rooms that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) referred to. So why are the UK Government resistant, as I understand they are, to the project proposed in Glasgow, which has the potential to save lives? Surely that should be part of the strategy, but it does not even mention drug use rooms of that sort. Why on earth not, given that all the evidence points towards significant reductions in the number of deaths? No one dies of an overdose when they take their drugs in such safe rooms. Why are we not moving towards that? It is a disgrace, frankly, that we are not.

John Mann: Is not the right hon. Gentleman overstating his case? I have visited quite a number of safe rooms across the world and studied the academic research into them. Is it not an overstatement to suggest that nobody dies there? The question of safe injecting is one of the aspects of death, but, as all the Dutch surveys demonstrate, the fundamental determinant of how long someone with an opiate addiction will live is whether they come off heroin and stop injecting.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The briefing from Transform states:

“No one has died from an overdose, anywhere in the world, ever, in a supervised drug consumption room”.

If Transform has made a mistake, I apologise.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he is making such a powerful case about the importance of evidence-based policy. Is it not the case that drug consumption rooms allow us to reach people who would otherwise be very hard to reach and, over time, build up trust and bring them into recovery? The purpose of drug consumption rooms is not simply to go on handing out drugs to people, day after day. It is to reach those hard-to-reach people and bring them into recovery, over time.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree, and I applaud the hon. Lady for the work she has done in arguing the case for reform. Trials of this type of approach have shown huge reductions in acquisitive crime resulting from illegal drug use and in the small-time dealing indulged in to pay for the habit, but the Government withdrew the funding for these trials in April 2016. How short-sighted! The strategy stresses the importance of listening to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, but it recommends the use of rooms where drugs can be taken safely, heroin prescribing and, in effect, the decriminalisation of the use of drugs, and the Government are doing none of those things. If the Government say they should listen to the council, they should please listen to what it is arguing for.

It seems to me there is a dishonesty to this debate. In the foreword to the strategy, the Home Secretary says:

“By working together, we can achieve a society that works for everyone and in which every individual is supported to live a life free from drugs”.

[*Norman Lamb*]

Incidentally, does that mean “free from drugs” other than the most dangerous drug, alcohol, which we of course allow to be sold and take the tax from? The objective or ambition of a world free from drugs is unachievable, as other hon. Members have pointed out, so let us just get rid of this fantasy at the heart of the so-called war on drugs, which has been a stupid and catastrophic failure. Such an international policy approach has had extraordinary consequences. It has massively enriched organised crime, to the tune of billions of pounds every year. It has also criminalised young people in particular, and it has had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities.

Illegal drug use is actually lower among black and minority ethnic groups than in the white population in this country, but black people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched for drugs than white people. Our son, who is in the music business, was driving in London in the middle of the night, on his way back from a recording at the BBC, when he was stopped in his car. He happened to have a black artist with him, who said, “This is just a fact of life in London for us. This is what happens to us.” They were all pinned up against a wall as they were searched for illegal drugs. There were no illegal drugs in the car, but this is too often what black people in our inner cities have to cope with week in, week out, and it is not acceptable. Black people in London are five times more likely to be charged for the possession of cannabis than white people. This is extraordinary discrimination.

We criminalise people with mental health problems. We know that there is massive comorbidity: if people are suffering from mental ill health—depression, anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder—they may well end up taking drugs as an escape from the pain that they are suffering, and then we prosecute them and give them a criminal record. How cruel and stupid! There is hypocrisy in that the former Prime Minister famously took cannabis when he was at Eton and many members of this Government have probably taken drugs in their time, yet they are happy to see the careers of other citizens blighted by criminal convictions for what they did in their younger years. Surely that is intolerable.

The strategy addresses the issue of decriminalisation and refers to the evidence of harm, yet we know that the most dangerous drug for causing harm is alcohol, as I have already said, to which the Government take a completely different approach. They still use the language of having a tough approach to enforcement, yet the Home Office’s own report from a couple of years ago showed that there is no link between the toughness of a regime and the level of drug use in society. The illegal market also causes extreme violence in our communities. To control the market in a particular community, all people can do is resort to extreme violence to protect it; they cannot have resort to the courts, as other capitalists do. It has always been disadvantaged communities that suffer the most.

I recommend to anyone here who is interested in this subject the book by Johann Hari, “Chasing the Scream”, which refers to the extraordinary spikes in violence—particularly in America, where there is ever a legal clampdown on the suppliers of drugs to communities—when new suppliers come into a community and seek to gain control of the market. The only way they do that is by using extreme violence.

As I have said, in Portugal, after initial resistance, there is political unity across the spectrum. In the United States, more and more states are moving towards regulated markets for cannabis. In Canada, a Liberal Government are legislating to introduce a legal regulated market. In the UK, I commissioned an expert panel that included a serving chief constable, Michael Barton from Durham. Its recommendation was that in the interests of public health—not despite public health, which is an important point for the Minister—we should move towards a regulated market where we control potency, who grows it and who sells it. That protects those at risk of psychosis and memory impairment because potency is controlled. If people buy from a criminal, they have no idea what they are buying. The criminal has no interest in people’s welfare; they simply want to make a fast buck from them. If people buy from a regulated seller, there is a chance to avoid the sort of harm that we see so often at the moment.

I make this plea: do not claim that the case for change is irresponsible, but bring about change because it will save lives, it will reduce HIV and hepatitis C infection, it will protect people better, it will end the ludicrous enriching of criminals, it will cut violence in our poorest communities, it will end the self-defeating criminalisation of people who have done exactly the same thing as successful people in government, in business and in all sorts of walks of life, and it will raise vital tax revenues. Follow the evidence. Do not perpetuate the stigma and the fear. End this catastrophic approach to drugs policy.

4.32 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It has been a splendid afternoon. May I offer my congratulations to all those who have made maiden speeches? How refreshing it is and how grateful we all are to the Prime Minister for organising this fresh injection of new Members into the House—and so many of them are women. Goodness, there has been a great change in this place since I came in with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who is on the Front Bench. It was thought remarkable then that there were four Members from ethnic minorities here. It was a place that was crude and macho because it was dominated by males. We have seen it civilised and become more sensible and more representative of society.

We heard the passion and sincerity of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who is depriving education but enriching us. I am sure she will go far. What a joy it is to see a member of the Sikh community here, with their great history and their marvellous contribution to this country. Are we not coming to a stage where Parliament represents the nation more fully than it ever has before? Many congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

I also congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). The Liberal Democrats have done so much to introduce sanity into the drugs debate. I will not say too much about the Minister, who has the misfortune of presenting the nonsense that civil servants have been writing, in my experience, for the past 30 years on this subject. I remember two people who have had that job with great affection. Mo Mowlam would send me letters with a little handwritten note on the bottom

saying, “See you in the Strangers tonight to tell you what I really think.” When we got together after she stood down, she intended to write a book urging the end of drug prohibition. She could not do it in office and, sadly, she died before the time came. Bob Ainsworth was another person who had the hideous job of trying to defend the failing policy that is the prohibition of drugs. As soon as he stood down, he was campaigning on the other side.

The House has been marred by culpable cowardice for the last 46 years on this subject and countless people have died or suffered as a result. I had an email last night to tell me about a drama documentary to be based on the life of Elizabeth Brice. I gave a little whoop of joy at the news. Elizabeth campaigned under the name of Clare Hodges. She was a wonderful, vibrant woman, a television producer who translated the “Noddy” tales into Latin, among her many achievements. She suffered severely from multiple sclerosis, and she came to the House and collaborated with me in a terrible crime on the Terrace. I supplied her with a cup of hot water, with which she made and drank cannabis tea. According to the rules of the House, and the policy approved by the Government—and, sadly, the Opposition too—she would have been liable to go to prison for seven years, and I would probably have been accompanying her.

We have to call on those who put up with the barbaric stupidity and cruelty of a Government policy that denies seriously ill people their medicine of choice to perform acts of civil disobedience. Elizabeth Brice spoke to the Parliament in Belgium and within months it changed its policy. Most other countries allow the use of this most ancient of medicines—it has been used for 5,000 years on every continent—for medicinal purposes. I know that Members are not supposed to do this, but I call on people to break the law, to come here and use cannabis and see what happens—to challenge the authorities to arrest them. That is the only way to get through to the Government’s mind, which is set in concrete. The law is evidence free and prejudice rich.

In another example of the fact that the Government are in denial, I tabled a simple question to ask how many prisons were free of drug use last year. The answer came back that 83 were free of drug use for one month. That was not the question. I asked again how many were free for a whole year, and the answer came back, “One”. Which one? It was Blantyre House. How many prisoners were in that prison? None—it was closed. The Government have cracked the problem—the answer to drug use in prison is to get rid of the prisoners, not the drugs!

If anything mocks the stupidity and futility of our drugs policy, it is the fact that there are more drugs in prison than outside. There is not a drug-free prison in the whole of the United Kingdom. We also fool ourselves about how the drugs get in—it is not through the visitors or drones. If we look at discipline in prisons and the poor wages paid to many staff, we can quickly work out how drugs get in. There is conspiracy and corruption there.

We need to learn the mountainous lessons of prohibition, which only happened in 1971, with Jim Callaghan following what the United Nations had done under the influence of President Nixon. The world said it would get rid of all illegal use of drugs, but they were not a problem here. There was virtually no use of marijuana/cannabis in this country. Some people had become addicted

through morphine to heroin, but there were no deaths. We had fewer than 1,000 users. Every year since then, under harsh prohibition, we have created an empire of crime and ended up with 320,000 addicts in this country. That is an enormous burden.

We cannot ignore what has happened in the rest of the world. I despair of any change in Government policy, because the Government are stuck in the foolish idea that prohibition works, as was clear when we debated what is now the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. The thinking is that psychoactive substances are a hideous problem, and anyone is very foolish to put anything in their body that has never been ingested by a human being before. The nearest to an intelligent policy came from New Zealand, which said that it would license psychoactive substances if the producers could establish that they were safe. Otherwise, it is just a jungle out there.

Last year, when we debated the Psychoactive Substances Bill, the Government fell into the old trap of saying that “something must be done”, which is the greatest error in politics. Governments cannot think of anything that is going to work, but they have to seem to do something. That was the argument then, and that is where we have ended up with this damaging Act. It was said that Poland and Ireland had virtually the same Bill. Those countries closed the headshops, and the result was not a decrease but an increase in drug use. When the drug trade is on the streets, people have a vested interest and can get more money out of it. In Ireland the use of what were then called legal highs among young people rose from 16% to 22%, and the same thing is happening here. Why on earth do the Government not recognise that prohibition does not work? In America, 13 years of alcohol prohibition did not work for the same reasons.

I have never taken an illegal drug in my life, but I consider the medical use of cannabis to be of immense benefit, and that should be our first step. I believe that the rest of the world will leave us behind; they are laughing at us now. Canada is leading the way, but there is no doubt that the system works in Portugal. The people in Portugal to whom I have spoken did not have the support of any great number of Members of their Parliament, and they did not have the support of the press, but they charged ahead, in a very courageous way, and said, “This is going to work.” That was 16 years ago, and there is every indication, given the number of deaths and the incidence of disease since then, that it has been successful in every respect.

I think that we will follow—as, indeed, we must—the example of half the states in America, and of Uruguay and other countries in South America, and legalise drugs, because that is the only way in which to reduce harm and reduce the number of deaths.

4.43 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I am proud to address the Chamber as the newly elected representative of the people of Wolverhampton South West. Whether they voted for me or for the Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Green party representative, I will endeavour to represent them in the House to the best of my ability. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Rob Marris, who stood down when the general election was called. He was a conscientious and much-liked Member of Parliament.

[Eleanor Smith]

Wolverhampton, in common with other cities throughout the United Kingdom, has a drug problem. Drug use brings with it a set of associated problems: crime, antisocial behaviour, and other social problems associated with addiction such as broken homes and damaged people, all of whom are in need of support from our increasingly underfunded and overworked social services. A recent BBC report highlighted the use of so-called legal highs in the city, and in that context I welcome the latest legislation reclassifying those substances.

However, what most addicts need is help. They need rehabilitation programmes to help them to come off drugs, because substance abuse and addiction are problems that do not go away on their own. We need a properly funded system to help those people because, if more people can access drug rehabilitation services providing education and employment opportunities, addicts can more easily find a way out of addiction and abuse. The scourge of drug use is associated with an underlying lack of opportunities for young people in Wolverhampton. We should look to European models of how best to do this, rather than reach for American-style punitive solutions, which only drive the problem into our prisons, where it becomes endemic, with hardened drug users returning to our streets to become another thing our hard-pressed NHS staff and police officers have to deal with.

I will now talk about Wolverhampton itself. The Wolverhampton South West constituency was created in 1950. It is repeatedly a marginal and one of three constituencies covering the city of Wolverhampton. Within its boundary is the retail and business core of the city centre, Bank's brewery, universities, schools and Molineux stadium, home of Wolverhampton Wanderers—and please God, may I say that right. The largest employer in Wolverhampton is local government. The constituency fans out from the city centre to include the western and south-western parts of the city.

Wolverhampton South West is a microcosm of modern Britain, a jigsaw of places, names and postcodes. It is a bellwether constituency, moving from Tory to Labour, with shifts in the economic and political moods. There are huge inequalities of income. There are rich, poor, privileged and under-privileged, living only a few miles apart. There is a diversity of culture: white British, Asian British, West Indian, Africans, eastern Europeans and Kurdish, each with their own faith—Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and Christian, which is my strong faith.

Although Wolverhampton South West has existed for only 67 years, it has a surprisingly rich political history, one which is relevant today. It is associated by some with Enoch Powell, its first MP, from 1950 until 1974. His inflammatory rivers of blood speech in 1968, warning of civil unrest if immigration went unchecked, was set there. Its second MP was Nicholas Budgen, known as one of the Maastricht rebels, who first mooted the idea of a referendum on the European single currency and who opposed all further integration in Europe.

In 1997, Labour won the seat for the first time and it continued to hold the seat until 2010, when Paul Uppal, a prominent Sikh businessman, won it back for the Conservatives. It is a testament to the people of Wolverhampton South West that their actions at the ballot box demonstrated how far they had come from the racial legacy of Enoch Powell in electing a Sikh MP,

and now they have taken another historical step forward by electing the first black woman to represent a west midlands constituency in Parliament.

In electing me, a nurse from a working-class background, a trade unionist and a first-generation immigrant, the people of Wolverhampton South West are saying that they want change. They are saying that they liked the Labour manifesto and that they have had enough of austerity. They do not want any more cuts to public services. They want properly funded education and social services protecting the old and caring for the weakest in our society. They said, “Give us a Brexit that works for all.” The young people said, “Give us something so we can improve our lives and give us hope”—and they all said, “Save our NHS.”

I hope that I will be able to play my part in the coming years in making a difference to youth unemployment and homelessness in my constituency. They are a blight on our society. Wolverhampton has one of the highest jobless rates for 16 to 24-year-olds: according to studies published in 2016, youth unemployment in Wolverhampton was 27%, among the highest in the country. I pledge to work with all those in Wolverhampton who want to help and care for those who have dropped through the increasingly threadbare safety net this country offers.

The other issue that I will be involved with I have been working on for my entire working life of 40 years in the NHS: the conditions of the low-paid workers. The one-line Government statement on the NHS in Her Majesty’s Gracious Speech was short on detail with no real ideas on how to improve the NHS and rescue it from the position they have put it in. It would be bad enough if that had resulted merely from ignorance and mismanagement, but that is not the case; these are the results of the policies they have been pursuing for the last seven years. This Government should read the recent Labour party manifestos to learn what the NHS urgently needs. It is all in there: investment, planning, education and training, and much more.

I also need to make a statement about a row that has broken out concerning my comments about a Black country flag created in 2012 after a competition organised by the Black Country Living Museum. This flag has a link of chains as its primary image. I have had two concerns about the connotations of this image; its historical association with the slave trade, and whether it should be the only brand image for the Black country. An article appeared in the local press saying that I thought that the flag was racist and should be scrapped. My comments had been misrepresented. I believe in a free press, but its reporting must be done responsibly, in a fair and honest way. I have received many abusive messages, and I am on the receiving end of the kind of threatening behaviour that many of my colleagues in this House have also received and have recently discussed, and I have learned the hard way how difficult being an MP is.

But, on a much happier note, I am proud of the social culture and industrial and economic heritage of Wolverhampton and the wider Black country. I am proud of the contribution made by the Black country’s industry to begin the industrial revolution, which revolutionised the lives of people all around our planet. Above all, I am proud of the tolerance, equality and social cohesion that the people in the Black country and Wolverhampton South West, and in the wider UK, enjoy.

As a Member of Parliament, I will endeavour to work to promote and elevate these great aspects of the people of Wolverhampton South West and the Black country. I stand by them and for them. Thank you for allowing me to speak today, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.52 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): May I add my congratulations to the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—which apparently is one constituency—and for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on their maiden speeches? I am sure they are already aware that the next time they speak they will not be listened to with such reverence. [*Interruption.*] I will do my best.

On drug policy reform, there are two problems we are trying to address: first, the crime surrounding illegal drugs, and, secondly, the harm done by addiction to drugs. The first technically looks quite easy. We could look to decriminalise and legislate for drugs; overnight we would take away all the power from the criminals. The second problem is harder, but would be easier when the victims are not being stigmatised and driven into the arms of criminals.

The Government report launched last Friday failed to address those core issues. Despite the few nods in the direction of healthcare, the UK Government have fundamentally missed the point again. The Home Secretary says she wants a strategy to deliver a drug-free society, and that, in a nutshell, is why it is seriously flawed, because the drugs are not the problem. We should be asking: why do people take drugs and why do some 10% of users develop an addiction? What leads people to abuse drugs? That is the issue. If Ministers think that coming down hard on criminals will remove drugs from society and therefore end the need for them, they are delusional. We have been trying that for years, and the situation has only got worse.

The latest figures show the highest number of fatalities since comparable records began 24 years ago, with 50 a week across the UK and deaths from heroin doubling in three years, yet the Government have brushed aside the testimonies from the Anyone's Child campaign. Anyone's Child represents people who have lost relatives to drugs, and they now bravely argue for legalisation and regulation to prevent others from having to share their agony.

I welcome the talk about a renewed focus on the importance of evidence-based drug treatment services, and moves to address underlying factors such as inadequate housing, unemployment and mental health problems, but the Government's big message is still about tough law enforcement. When are they going to comprehend that drug reform is a health issue, and that the war on drugs that has been waged for the past 100 years has failed? They will never bring it to an end when their primary focus is on stamping down on dealers and users. In continuing to do that, we marginalise the very people we should be seeking to help. It is a cowardly report and an opportunity lost.

We could be learning from certain events in history, but we seem to be ignoring them. We have already mentioned the fact that the USA banned alcohol, but the people there still wanted alcohol. The US Government could have licensed alcohol manufacturers, established

a state-enforced quality control system with a recognised distribution network, and licensed premises in which to sell alcohol, all of which would have paid taxes to the Government. Instead, they introduced prohibition. That encouraged criminals to produce substances of dubious integrity that they sold at whatever price they liked in establishments that were unfit for purpose. Those activities were all fiercely protected by unrestrained violence. Crime rates soared, people died from consuming the product, addiction increased and rivals died in violent turf wars. Corruption was rampant and communities lived in fear. Does that sound familiar? Today's war on drugs mirrors those processes, except that they are now being carried out on a far larger scale because we have encouraged them to grow over a far longer period of time. Stamping down hard on the criminals who control the growth, harvesting and distribution of drugs has only increased the levels of violence, fear and corruption that they use to hold on to and grow their marketplace.

Once we have started a war that we were never going to win, ending it becomes increasingly difficult. The onus is on us to justify the time, the cost in human lives, the misery and the taxpayers' money involved, and to justify why we started the war in the first place. If we cannot do that, the only option seems to be to plough on, doggedly proclaiming that we were right all along and steadfastly refusing to listen to alternative strategies aimed at resolving the issue. That is where we are now in the war on drugs. Rather like the generals in the first world war ordering tens of thousands of conscripts over the top in a futile show of strength, we cannot see a way out that would justify the losses and sacrifices that have been made. We therefore continue to make the same mistakes over and over again. We should note that when prohibition ended in 1933, the crime rate and the addiction rate plummeted.

Transform has published a report in response to the latest offering from the UK Government in which it points out that, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,

"taking a criminal justice-led approach to drugs creates a vast criminal market, siphons resources away from health, shifts drug dealing and trafficking around, switches users between drugs, and stigmatises and drives people who use drugs from seeking help."

In other words, prohibition is a discredited and deadly way of making drugs stronger and more dangerous while funding organised crime.

The National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse estimates that the combined cost to society of substance abuse is £15.4 billion a year. The cost in human lives and the suffering of addicts, their friends and families can never be quantified. As the war continues, we are seeing more addicts, more cost, more pain and no sign that things will improve. The current approach is not working, and we need a fundamental change of philosophy.

A growing body of well-informed people say that it is time to decriminalise and legalise drugs. These people are not lily-livered do-gooders or hippies left over from the '60s; they are ex and current law enforcement officers. They have seen the problems up close and personal. They have spent decades locking people up, but they have come to the conclusion that their actions did not make a blind bit of difference. It is a tough call to recognise that they had it wrong, so the people from Law Enforcement Against Prohibition—LEAP—should be listened to.

[Ronnie Cowan]

A week ago, I hosted a dinner in the House of Commons with 24 people around the table from the Royal Society for Public Health, the British Medical Association, *The British Medical Journal*, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, the Faculty of Public Health, the University of Cambridge, Transform, the Buchanan Institute, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the House of Lords. Most of us self-administered psychoactive substances while we were there. All representatives spoke openly and honestly and the general consensus was that the current drugs policy is not working and that the war on drugs should be led by health, not criminal justice. Why is self-administrating a drug illegal? Technically, the answer is because we made that particular drug illegal and put it on a list. As I said, most of us self-administered psychoactive substances, but alcohol is not on the list. We have created a problem and now we cannot fix it—unless, of course, we decriminalised and controlled the production, quality and distribution of drugs. We could then tax them and use the money to provide better treatment, rehabilitation and harm reduction services—rather like we do with alcohol, but hopefully much more effectively.

We have not always had our current attitudes towards drugs, and we have not always seen the violence and crime that surrounds drugs. A good few years ago, there was a regular annual festival of music and arts, and drug taking was a big part of the festival—it was acknowledged and accepted. The festival was frequented by many people, including a few celebrities. We probably know a few of their names: Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero—those kind of dudes. A hundred years ago, UK pharmacies would sell many products made from derivatives of heroin or cocaine. Cough mixtures contained opiates, and department stores sold heroin tins. In 1971, when the Misuse of Drugs Act was passed, 13,000 people had a problem with drugs. After 46 years of the war on drugs, we now have 380,000, and yet the Government still want to pursue that policy.

If we decriminalised or legalised drugs, the one issue we would be left with is the one that we should be addressing right now: why do some people become addicts? If we can solve that, we will go a long way to winning the war on drugs. So what do we know? Professor Bruce Alexander was used to performing experiments on rats and was familiar with the Skinner box, which was seen as a good place to study drug addiction. Scientists had perfected techniques to allow rats to inject small doses of a drug into themselves by pressing a lever. That required tethering the rat to the ceiling of the box and implanting a needle into their jugular veins. The drug passed through the tube and the needle into the rats' bloodstreams almost instantaneously when they pushed the lever. Under appropriate conditions, rats would press the lever often enough to consume large amounts of heroin, morphine, amphetamine, cocaine and other drugs. Then, along with his colleagues Robert Coombs, Patricia Hadaway and Barry Beyerstein, he created "Rat Park". It was heaven for rats, with areas to move freely, dig, socialise and breed. He gave those rats two water bottles, one of which was laced with morphine. None of the rats developed an addiction. The environment that the rats lived in was clearly a factor—not the only factor, but a major one.

The obvious question is whether we have tried this experiment on humans, and the answer, unfortunately, is yes. We gave it a name: the Vietnam war. Hundreds of thousands of young men were shipped thousands of miles from home and dropped into a hell hole. The US military quickly realised that a large percentage of them were smoking pot, so they clamped down. The men turned to heroin, as it was harder for the authorities to find and confiscate. At the end of the Vietnam war, with a large number of heroin addicts about to be repatriated to their home towns and cities, the authorities expected a massive problem, but it did not happen. Once back home among their family and friends, the vast majority kicked their habit within a year. Those who did not were among those living in the poorest conditions or who had other issues that had led to their addiction in the first place.

We see the same behaviour of increased addiction where indigenous people were forced off their land and into reservations and camps by white settlers in the USA, Canada and Australia, so what can we do? As we talked about earlier, some countries have recently pursued alternative policies involving the decriminalisation of drug possession. Argentina, Estonia, Australia and Portugal have all taken a health-centred approach to the issue. Portugal decriminalised drug use, and drug addiction declined when the penalties for personal possession were removed. Rather than being criminalised, people are passed on to a "dissuasion committee"—I am not fond of the term, which sounds a bit Orwellian—consisting of members of the health, social work and law professions. Those considered to be addicts or problematic users are forwarded to treatment and rehabilitation programmes. According to the Royal Society for Public Health, within 10 years of implementing those policies the number of drug addicts in Portugal has halved. If the UK achieved the same success, the Buchanan Institute estimates that the financial saving would be around £7.7 billion a year.

For the record, I do not take illegal drugs—that is my choice—but if I chose to take them within the privacy of my home, I honestly do not see what harm it would do to society at large. How would arresting me improve anything? Yet we regularly prosecute people and, it has to be said, primarily poor people.

We seem to have one approach to law enforcement for rich city slickers sniffing a line of cocaine in their penthouse suite, and quite another for a kid smoking a joint on a council estate. It is no coincidence that the areas of the UK with the highest levels of social deprivation are the areas with the highest numbers of drug-related deaths. According to the Prison Reform Trust, one in 10 people in custody today is there because of a drugs-related offence. Some of our prisons have had serious problems with synthetic drugs, or Spice, in recent years. Those with the least access to money and lawyers, those who are less socially mobile, will always be more vulnerable.

Our attitude to drug consumption has to change. Only then can we see that the issue is addiction, and addiction is a health issue, not a criminal one. We must look to decriminalise and legislate. By doing so, we will take the power away from criminals and put the money into education, rehabilitation and reducing drug harm.

5.7 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I declare an interest as a Suffolk county councillor.

Like many towns of its size, Ipswich would be seriously improved by society dealing more effectively with the scourge of hard drugs. Ipswich has a low level of crime for its size, but there is too much violent crime, and that crime is rising. Much of the violence in our town has been carried out by drug dealers, targeted against drug dealers, motivated by arguments over drugs, fuelled by drugs or, in the murders of the women on London Road in 2006, targeted against young people whose lives have been dominated by their need to get money to pay for drugs.

One of my most passionate ambitions is to find ways to bring the marginalised in our town back into some sort of social life, to help them end their addictions, to support them to find housing and employment, and ultimately to give them the greatest gift of all—self-respect—so that they no longer need to feel dependent but can hold their head up and say proudly that they are contributing to our town.

I am immensely proud to have been chosen by the people of Ipswich to represent them in the House and, at the same time, humbled by the responsibility that places upon me. Ipswich is an exciting, vibrant yet unpretentious town. Although there was a pre-Roman settlement on the site and it became a substantial town during the Saxon period, winning its royal charter in 1200, we do not dwell on our history.

Ipswich is what it is and where it is because it was the borough that served the rural county around it. It started as a port, exporting agricultural produce. It grew rapidly in the 19th century, building the ploughs, seed drills, reapers and other modern agricultural machinery of the time that transformed the productivity of our farms, not just in Suffolk, but throughout the UK and indeed the empire. We developed artificial fertiliser on the back of our initial base as the centre of the coprolite industry, making a good living out of a load of old squat!

In the late 19th industry, Ipswich's heavy engineering grew, almost all of which is now gone. The world's first lawnmower was built in Ipswich in 1832, and Ransomes Jacobsen still builds lawnmowers in Ipswich today, but we have not hung around or tried to revive dead businesses.

In the 1960s and 1970s, roads were reconfigured and areas cleared to enable the building of large office blocks to house the insurance industry, which is still one of the major employers in our town. The BT research and development headquarters just down the road is one of the most important local employers, and the East of England Development Agency invested significant sums in the first decade of this century in providing the accommodation needed for the IT spin-off companies that have grown out of BT.

Ipswich has immense potential. To his credit, I believe my predecessor, Ben Gummer, could see that. We have higher unemployment than the rest of Suffolk but many people with skills just waiting to be called upon. We have the space to expand and adapt, even in the very heart of the town. We have a beautiful and sophisticated focus on the waterfront, and the affordable housing and commercial space for new people and businesses to move in. We are only just over an hour from the City of London by train, but very much not just simply a commuter town. Ben Gummer put a lot of effort into trying to improve the rail link with London and into the regeneration of the waterfront, and I certainly intend to continue that work.

I also want to give credit to the previous MP for Ipswich, Chris Mole, and all that he achieved for Ipswich. Chris has been a good friend of mine for more than 20 years, and I was delighted when he was elected to represent Ipswich in a by-election in 2001. Much was built or started in Ipswich during his time as MP, and I know that a lot of that was due to his championing of our town: a new accident and emergency department at the hospital; a new sixth-form college on the outskirts of the town; a completely new set of buildings for the further education college; and a commitment from the Government to build a complete flood defence system, including a tidal barrier to protect the town from sea level rise—I am glad to say that that commitment is now reaching fulfilment. When he was leader of the county council, he told me that his No. 1 ambition was to achieve a university for Suffolk, and he had already put in place the commitment from the pre-existing further education college, the county council and the borough council necessary to achieve a united bid for a new university. As MP for Ipswich, he was able to steer that to completion, and I do not believe he has ever had the full credit he deserves for that achievement. As a town with a brand new university, as the fulcrum around which our waterfront turns, Ipswich is undergoing a change every bit as radical as occurred in the 19th century when we started building machinery. We are entering a new and exciting phase of our development, where the imagination and intellectual skills of our young people will be the building blocks of our prosperity. Thank you, Chris.

Ipswich is, of course, a unique town, but many of the problems our residents face are national ones, shared with citizens across the UK. I have contributed in my own small way to helping with the governance and funding of voluntary organisations in Ipswich that work with people to help them to avoid marginalisation. I refer to organisations such as the citizens advice bureau; the Ipswich Disabled Advice Bureau; the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality, which is now also bidding to set up a law centre; and, recently, The Oak, an independent drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, which is taking people on that final step between renouncing an addiction and actually gaining the personal self-confidence and self-worth needed to want not to relapse. All those organisations are struggling financially because of reductions in local authority funding.

We need to decide what sort of society we want to live in. What possible sense can it make to increase the availability of prison places at enormous cost but not to reduce re-offending rates, not to support preventive measures such as personalised job seeking for people at risk, and not to fully fund drug rehabilitation programmes, alcohol dependency programmes and hospital provision? How can we expect people to take care of what they are doing to themselves if they are unable to get a job, feed themselves properly, get the psychiatric help or counselling they need or even have somewhere safe and private to sleep the night? It is shocking to see increasing numbers of people—women as well as men, young as well as old—sleeping in shop doorways, in underpasses or in cemeteries in what is still the fifth largest economy in the world. How can we as a society say to those people with a straight face, “You must not take hard drugs?” when we are not offering them any way to escape from the half-life that they are leading?

[Sandy Martin]

We do need to clamp down on drug deals and to ensure that the supply of hard drugs is curtailed, but, ultimately, we will not build a better society, free from the scourge of hard drugs, unless we can build a society where everyone feels valued and able to contribute. Let us make sure that all our citizens can have the education that they deserve, the counselling and the psychiatric help that they need, when they need it, the employment that makes the best use of their talents, access to a full and vibrant social life, safe, adequate and affordable housing and a healthy environment. People will then have lives that they value, and that they know others value, and will not want to turn to hard drugs to escape from their lives.

5.16 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) on a brilliant maiden speech? It was one of five exquisite, eloquent, factual and well-informed maiden speeches that we have heard today. I have visited all those towns other than Ipswich, although I do hope that, at some stage, I will visit his football club and make it five out of five. I congratulate all five new Members on those speeches.

Interestingly, the facts provided by each one so eloquently are not matched—as is ever the case in a debate on drugs—by the so-called facts provided in many contributions. It always saddens me that, when it comes to debates on drugs, people quote from other people's briefings rather than do their own empirical research. I could give very many examples of that, but I will confine myself to just one—safe injecting rooms.

I have been to safe injecting rooms in many places across the world. I have been to them in this country. Yes, they do exist in this country—not officially—and they can be effective in some situations for some people. They also have many downsides. The debate about the downsides and the upsides among the very people who run them are part of the larger debate. One of the problems is that they tend to be most effective in the heart of big cities, normally in so-called red light areas with significant amounts of street prostitution. That is where they tend to be most effective for some of the most vulnerable in society. Safe injecting in those places certainly saves lives, but what is found every time is that the majority of clientele who come in are passing tourists. That is because these places are known, they are visible and they are in the middle of big cities—of course those kind of zones are in the middle of big cities.

Sydney provides us with a good example, but there are many others places where that debate on their effectiveness has been a big problem. The ones in the Netherlands, which are not called safe injecting rooms, are not officially designated and are not public, are actually very effective. I call them retirement homes, because that is what they are. Cups of tea are available and the people there are very much of the same age profile—slightly younger—as those in retirement residences or social projects in this country. Clean needles, cups of tea, biscuits and advice are provided if required. The spaces are safe, they work and they save lives.

If we want, when it comes to injection, to save lives in this country, introducing Naloxone for paramedics would, overnight, have far bigger consequences, as has been

demonstrated; there are thousands of medical tracts on drugs. The Australians have used Naloxone in dealing with overdoses for the past 15 years; that is why they have far fewer deaths from overdoses. Its introduction in this country would be a major step forward in dealing with deaths.

I came to this subject in 2002, when 13 of my constituents died from heroin overdoses in one year. After a year of research, in which I went around the world with GPs to see what worked and what did not, I overwhelmingly came to the conclusion that what works is not politicians telling each other whether cannabis is good, bad, strong or weak, or what to do with this or that drug; it is trusting the experts—the medical experts.

All the debate today has been about illegal drugs, but probably the biggest single problem in this country, in terms of addiction and the number of people misusing drugs, is legal drugs—prescription and over-the-counter drugs; volume-wise and, I suspect, death-wise, that is a bigger problem. I could not have disagreed more with the Minister when she said that her test for her children—I am trying to quote her exactly—was whether the drug was available at Boots. No; what is available over the counter at Boots or any other chemists is a problem in the war on drugs. The over-prescription of drugs, and the illegal sale of prescription drugs in our communities, is a massive problem that, volume-wise, far outweighs the other problems.

When we talk about drugs, we are not talking about one thing. It is like talking about food; I suspect that a vegetarian would not want to be provided simply with “food” for a meal, if they visited one of us; they would probably want a certain type of food. We should trust medical expertise. In my area, after a battle, I got a system set up whereby if someone had a substance misuse problem—heroin being the biggest one—they went in through the front door of their GP's practice. It took me six months of battling to make sure that every GP's practice took part in that, and six months to ensure that it was the front door, not the back door. It took me three months to make sure that it was a GP, rather than a drug worker. Anyone can be a drug worker—there is no qualification for being one—but not anyone can be a GP; the standard, in my view, is satisfactorily high in this country.

Guess what we found? There has been a lot of talk of rehabilitation, but I will tell hon. Members the biggest rehabilitation that someone on heroin can get: it is going through the front door of their GP's practice, like everybody else in the community—like their mother, father, brother, sister, and sometimes their kids. It is going through the same door and seeing the same GP. Strangely, that is rehabilitating and normalising. It takes people back into society—and it is dirt cheap: the biggest single cost of this in my area is from the dental treatment, because those with a significant substance misuse problem do not tend to go to dentists. They go into treatment; I do not know what the treatment is, though I know some of the modalities, but the treatment is not my decision, or the decision of a politician, a councillor, the police, the criminal justice system, or a drug worker; the GP decides on the treatment. Strangely, these people wanted dental treatment; that was the highest single cost. Strangely, people who have had dental treatment have a far better chance of getting through a job interview than those who have had no

treatment for five or 10 years. A job means a bit more rehabilitation, and if the local council has its act together it can provide proper housing.

What happens when people have better teeth, the ability to go to their GP through the front door, a job and secure housing? What we found was that people stopped dying. There were 13 deaths in 2002, and over the next 11 years there were two. Vast numbers of people got back into work; they paid taxes—they were in rehabilitation. Forget the statistics that the Government give out about who is in treatment and who is not—I will talk in a moment about how the system has fiddled the figures since 2010—because a good statistic is the number of people paying taxes.

What is the saving? It is hard to quantify, but I can certainly quantify one thing. In 2002 the yearly average for the number of overdose admissions to Bassetlaw hospital was 170, each of which cost £4,000. That yearly average was immediately reduced to under 40, and it stayed like that for the next 11 years. That meant a saving of £500,000 a year for a small hospital. Some people were worried that the hospital would need security staff and cameras, to guard against all the drug addicts coming in, but there were far fewer drug addicts, far fewer overdoses and far fewer hospital admissions. That meant a direct saving. Remind me, Mr Deputy Speaker, which constituency had the biggest fall in acquisitive crime in the whole of the United Kingdom?

Hon. Members: Bassetlaw!

John Mann: Mr Deputy Speaker, you are ever wise, ever accurate and ever factual. Bassetlaw saw a 400% reduction in acquisitive crime. Why? Because it was the drug addicts committing most of the crime.

For 11 years people could go through the front door of their GP's surgery. Not everyone was happy. I have read the medical advice—not all of it, but hundreds and thousands of papers—and basically there is a two-thirds success rate for chronic relapsing illness, meaning that two thirds will be sorted, wherever the illness is, and a third never will be. There is a cohort of people who will always have problems, and they tend to go in and out of prison regardless, but there are far fewer of them because we have reduced the number by two thirds, leading to huge savings.

That does not totally solve the problem, but it allows the rest of the community to get on with their lives without being plagued. Pensioners were not having their windows smashed every five minutes by people who stole a fiver—the normal heroin theft is to break a pensioner's window and grab the first thing in sight. The fear and the cost of repairing the window is far bigger. Frankly, I think that if most pensioners knew they would just leave the fiver outside. That is what life was like.

What do the Government do? Two things. First—this is a big improvement in this new drugs strategy—they say, “Recovery, recovery, recovery. We are not going to bother maintaining anybody.” That change is vital. That is what they did in the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand—in fact, in every country I went to. They all left it to the doctors.

In 2002 only three countries did not have health authorities in charge of drugs policy: the United States—obviously—us and Iran. When I went to Iran to talk about drugs policy, I found that they had just changed it.

They had done that—this is my assessment, not what people there said—because, basically, all the drug addicts had been sent to be looked after by the religious leaders, who would put them in recovery. But it did not work, which was undermining the religious leaders. So those at the top in Iran sent people over to Australia to study the medical system there, and they came back and introduced it in Iran, which therefore now has a medicalised system—and there are big improvements. You see, doctors are rather good at treating people because they know what they are doing. Yes, they sometimes use methadone or buprenorphine treatments, and sometimes they bring in mental health therapies, but the system worked well through the NHS.

What have we done? In 2010, we threw all that out the window and gave it to the local councils, and all of them—including Labour councils—in their great stupidity privatised it. What do those Labour councillors say? “We know better than the GPs and the NHS. It’s got to be joined up. It’s got to be more than the NHS.” So they took it away from the NHS and, since 2013 in my constituency, people have not been able to walk through the front door of their GP practices.

Guess what has happened? I had a meeting on Saturday, in Retford. There have been hardly any burglaries in Retford in the last 100 years, but there are record numbers this year. Who is committing them? The druggies—people who are drug addicted but cannot go through the front door of their GP practice as they could before. I cannot get them in. I used to guarantee to every family: “I’ll get you an appointment within a couple of days.” And I did, and it was easy. They went in and saw their GP. They engaged with their GP, and it was hugely successful.

My recommendation to the Government and to my own party—perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) will pass this on to my leader—is to put this portfolio in health. That is what the Labour party policy review that I chaired in 2009 recommended, and it had 4,000 submissions. The leader at the time and the one after him ignored it. Third time lucky. Put the portfolio in health and say that a critical part of the policy is that the NHS—primary care GPs—will manage the patients. Say that people in this country have the right to be treated by their GP. Yes, more is needed from other services—absolutely: getting people into jobs, keeping control of crime and getting people into stable housing, but the NHS is at the heart of the issue.

By the way, why on earth have the Scottish Government moved away from their successes a few years ago in places like Glasgow towards this nonsense of people coming out of the recovery system after six months? The Government said, “Six months and that’s it—out you come.” That appears to have changed.

Sarah Newton indicated assent.

John Mann: If it has, that is brilliant, but we should never have gone back to that nonsense in the first place; I am sure the Minister will blame the Liberals. That is what we had in 2002: the revolving door. “Oh, you’re out—you’re clean.” “Who says I’m clean?” “Well it’s six months. You have to be.” It was a bit like how it is in the prisons: strangely, someone has some Naltrexone and “Oops! You’re clean!” That is the stats fiddled. Frankly, I could fiddle those stats. It is the system that does it. Totally meaningless.

[*John Mann*]

Let us have a bit of honesty. We would still have a problem. We would not get rid of it all. Dealing with Spice is not as straightforward as dealing with heroin, and the GPs do not have all the answers. But if someone with an addiction goes to a GP, the GP pulls in mental health services, and that does work. Across the world, people have found that. So let us not misquote what happened in Portugal, where I have been, because what I am talking about is the key to that system. Let us not misquote what happens in the Netherlands, where they have kicked out most of the coffee houses and they specifically demonise heroin—very sensibly at the time, in my view. The position for quite a while was, “Our problem is heroin. Do what you want, but you’re not doing heroin”, and they got on top of it. We are not in that situation, so we do not need that kind of overly crude approach. We can look at what the Swedes do and what the French do. In France, the GPs will not do it. With single-practice GPs working from their own home, it is easy—go to the local chemist and get the prescription, and do not even bother supervising it. Do not complicate it, that is my advice, and then we will get better results.

I can only give it as I see it. I have got the documents—the research is there. To new colleagues in all parts of the House, I say, “Read the assessments of what has happened, because there is a plethora of materials that demonstrate this.” We will not get rid of the problem, but we can significantly be on top of the problem. There are some improvements, but frankly not enough. Yet again, the Home Office is the wrong Department. Of course the police advisers all want to decriminalise drugs, because it gets crime down. I have heard this for 15 years: “If we decriminalised and didn’t arrest, crime would come down and the problem would be solved.” No, that is not the answer. Lots of good stuff could be done in terms of how we police and do not police. There are lessons we could learn from abroad.

The starting point is to shift the portfolio to health. We should be bold enough to say, “It doesn’t fit in with how this place works, but we’re doing it anyway. When we’re in power the portfolio will be in health.” That in itself would transform the situation in this country because then we would have to make sure that primary care is funded and would be able to stop wasting money elsewhere. Local councils: love them or loathe them, they haven’t got a clue—big error. We should tell our Labour councils, “Stop privatising and give it back to the NHS.”

5.36 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). I agree with him on doing one’s own research and reading the papers, but also on respecting professional expertise. Although I am afraid I come to slightly different conclusions on some aspects, there is a lot of agreement between us, particularly on locating the problem in the Department of Health.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Wolverhampton South West

(Eleanor Smith) and for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) all made wonderful, inspiring and rousing speeches. They set a very high bar for themselves, as well as their colleagues, over the coming years.

I thank the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for his suggestion that there should be a royal commission on drugs that looks carefully, thoroughly and objectively at the evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) provided very moving examples of how our legal structure is currently failing people. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) also gave inspiring and helpful speeches.

Over the past six months, following the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, I have had the great privilege of being exposed to a range of different experts, specialists, academics and interventions in my own constituency and beyond as I have been part of the process of making a BBC documentary on the use of drugs. I have been involved as an MP and as a citizen of a city with above-average rates of drug use and drug misuse, and with exceptionally forward-thinking, effective drug misuse services, including, but not only, GPs. The makers of the documentary have followed me around—veritably stalked me at times. They assessed the impact of the abuse and misuse of alcohol and other drugs—I am going to keep using that phrase—on my constituents and facilitated meetings between me and people with specialist knowledge and skills. The results will be broadcast in three parts this autumn. I have not seen it. Other documentaries may well be available, but I urge hon. Members to see what they made.

As part of that process, I have met local organisations commissioning or providing services to people with drug problems. I particularly pay tribute to the Bristol Drugs Project and DHI—Developing Health and Independence—along with commissioners in Bristol City Council. They have been extremely generous and patient with their time to educate and inform me, and also in being willing to listen to questions and ideas with which they did not necessarily agree, and vice versa—that is, ideas that I did not initially agree with but have been able to see the point of.

I have met people in support groups and programmes who are in the process of desisting from alcohol and other drug misuse. I have visited Horfield prison, which is in my constituency. I have been briefed on the nature of drug use—particularly the use of Spice—and its impact on the prison, the staff and the prisoners. I have met specialists including Sir David Nutt, the leading psychologist, pharmacologist and psychiatrist, who formerly chaired the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs, and Dr Ben Sessa, consultant child and adolescent and addiction psychiatrist at Imperial College, to discuss the research and evidence base for and against our current drugs policy.

I met a specialist drug safety tester from the Loop project, which provides free and confidential drug counselling and testing of substances—without, hon. Members may be pleased to hear, returning those substances. I was puzzled to hear that, but the testers cannot return substances to the people who have asked to have them tested, because that would be classed as drug dealing. I do not think that that is helpful, but it does at least provide people with information about the quality of what they might be about to take.

I was told by the Loop project that, as a result of its work, not only are people better informed about what they might be taking—whether or not it has been cut with impurities, including concrete—but if they discover that a substance is unsafe to take, they hand in quantities of drugs voluntarily. It is a way of cleaning up the supply of very unsafe drugs, as well as giving people the information they need to make a well-informed choice about whether, when and how to consume drugs. I discussed with Loop the purpose and function of drug consumption rooms. I take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw has said, because he has far more experience in this matter than I have, but I am interested to know more about the various pilots and the research that he mentioned.

I met homelessness organisations and homeless people who have compounding problems on top of drug and alcohol problems. I discussed with my campaign volunteers, staff and local residents their concerns about drug misuse, which are many and varied. I did various drug impact walks through my own constituency, looking around me, talking to people and identifying the problems that have both a visible and an invisible impact on local people.

I have analysed my own experience, as a long-term resident of the area, of how the use and misuse of drugs has affected the local area over the years, and how and why it has changed. I have, as a consequence, made many reports to the local drugs litter cleaning services. That is one of the consequences of the current regime that we would do well to address, and we should at least consider the use of drug consumption rooms because it would reduce nuisance to other people. I have also had to respond to extremely unpleasant side effects of alcohol and drug misuse on my own doorstep, both at home and in the entrance to my constituency office.

I have done a great deal of reading of the research on the impact of our current legal system and support services on the use and misuse of alcohol and other drugs. I thank everybody who has given me their time and attention during this process, which has been hugely educational, influenced my thinking and informed my beliefs. I particularly thank the BBC team, Bart, Ae, Poppy and Hugo, for making me part of such an interesting process.

To inform my response to the drug strategy, I contacted many of the people I have mentioned, and I analysed the findings of various papers by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and other evidence against the scope and detail of the strategy. As a result of that review, although I applaud aspects of the strategy—I will mention them shortly—I have the following criticisms. The strategy does not include an explicit aim of reducing or, ideally, eliminating premature deaths caused by drug use. I would really like to see that front and centre. The strategy virtually, although not completely, ignores the most harmful drug. I say respectfully to the Minister that alcohol is a drug, and one that is entirely legal; I will come back to that shortly. The Government's welcome acceptance of evidence-based treatments for drug misuse and mental health problems is a step forward, but it is undermined, as colleagues have said, by the lack of a funding strategy to support it. The strategy fails to take on key recommendations from the report published last year by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs on preventing opiate-related deaths.

Finally, I must add my voice to those of others who have said that the strategy represents a wasted opportunity, when the Government could have reviewed the entire legislative framework surrounding alcohol and other drugs and made it consistent, evidence-based and focused on harm reduction for all drug use. I echo the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Reigate that a commission should do what I believe the Government could have done over the last two years.

The strategy opens with the ambition “for fewer people to use drugs in the first place”, and for those who do, to “help them to stop and to live a life free from dependence.”

However, that ignores the fact that many people take drugs recreationally, free from dependence and free from the harm caused to other people that results from some drug use. They are at risk of causing some harm to themselves, and such harms tend to arise from the criminal justice framework that we wrap around them. We should have the ambitions to reduce harm and prevent deaths—I support the aim to reduce harm, and I want to increase recovery from dependence—but I also want to take us as a country towards a fully evidence-based, open-minded approach to both.

Most of the means of preventing death in the “Reducing Opioid-Related Deaths in the UK” report by the ACMD last year, which I mentioned earlier, have been ignored in the strategy. For instance, drug testing—I mean not testing of people to see if they have taken drugs, but of drugs to see what they have in them—as well as the provision of drug consumption rooms and a wider examination of forms of treatment have all been ignored either partially or wholly. The strategy ducks the fact that much of the use of alcohol and other drugs takes place with comparatively little or no harm identified by the user, and frequently with great pleasure, which therefore undermines some of the messages given in the strategy. If users do not themselves experience their drug taking in a way described by the strategy, they are likely to dismiss all of the good stuff in it. Harms arise from the unregulated nature of the market. The organisation Loop has shown me one of the huge life-saving benefits of being able to test drugs such as ecstasy in clubs and festivals. I want the full protection of regulation, education, testing and a licensing regime to be given to all my constituents, not just those whose drug of choice is the legally available one of alcohol.

I must say that there are some aspects of the strategy that I very much welcome, such as the emphasis on prevention and the use of compulsory personal, social and health and economic education, which is now part of the curriculum, to increase the awareness and understanding of young people. By the way, I say to the Government, “You’re welcome”. It took us a while to convince the Government that this needed to happen, but Opposition Members are always pleased when the Government realise we have got something right. I am also very pleased that the drug strategy recognises the limitations of some educational approaches, such as the format of lectures by the police or reformed addicts. Such approaches tend not to have a good evidence base, and I am glad the Government have recognised that.

I also want to say that the two drugs that have arguably caused me the greatest personal harm are two legal drugs—alcohol and tobacco. I am sure everybody

[*Thangam Debbonaire*]

in the House knows about the link between tobacco consumption and lung cancer and many may also know about the link between alcohol consumption and liver cancer, but it was not until I was diagnosed with breast cancer that I learned about the causal links between alcohol consumption and other cancers. While I was being treated, I was contacted by a publican about the new NICE guidelines on alcohol consumption. He claimed that they were biased and in favour of teetotalism, and he was very angry about what he said was an unnecessary and unwelcome bias, given that the guidelines say that there is no “safe” level of alcohol consumption. I therefore read the guidelines and all the research review papers informing the guidelines—I was on sick leave, so I had time to do so—and I came to the carefully considered conclusion that the guidelines were both accurate and helpful.

It was helpful to me to know that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption, and reading the research papers helped to convince me that the abstemiousness, as far as I could possibly manage it, that I had fallen into during chemotherapy was something I wished to keep to for the sake of my own health after the treatment ended. This was all news to me: I did not know until I had breast cancer that alcohol was so closely linked to it. Since then, I have realised how many other people are not aware of the wide, many and varied risks associated with alcohol, which is a completely legal drug. Alcohol is available on these very premises, and no doubt somebody somewhere is in the process of consuming that legal drug right now. At the risk of sounding like Nana from “The Royle Family”, I have—with the exception of a very small glass of bubbly at weddings and perhaps a sweet sherry at Christmas—stuck to my non-consumption of alcohol, and I have to say that I feel all the better for it. That is a good example of how providing accurate information about a drug can inform someone’s decision making.

Alcohol is at the top end of the most harmful substances both to the user and to others—it is more harmful than heroin, in fact—but if I fall off the alcohol-free wagon by going into a shop or a pub and buying some alcohol, I at least know that it will not have been cut with something much more poisonous. I know that I am not risking my job by breaking the law and I know that I will be picked up afterwards if dropping off the wagon causes me problems. I believe that the regulatory, information and licensing systems for alcohol provide a great template for reforming the law on other drugs. I am not knocking anybody else’s right to choose to drink alcohol; I just want parity for my constituents who use other drugs.

I want to say quickly that I am not sure where the money will come from for everything, because money was conspicuously absent from the strategy. Other Members have drawn attention to that and perhaps others who are still to come will do too. That is a big omission. Whether it is in interventions purely in the health service, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw referred to, or in drug treatment programmes, specialist programmes or mental health services, the cuts by this Government in local government, the health service and elsewhere have been felt across the board. There is no good way to carry out any of the very good proposals in the strategy

without adequate funding. Mental health services and drug and alcohol services all need to be properly funded. As I am sure the Government are aware, there is a 2.5 return on investment. I hope that the Minister will address that point in her closing remarks.

Something that is very personal to me is the prevention of drug-related deaths, particularly those from heroin. People in my life have lost theirs to drug addiction, including addiction to heroin and alcohol. That is why I want to be clear that when I talk about reforming our laws, I am not saying that these drugs are good to take; I am just saying that if we are clear that alcohol is not good for us and yet it is legal, well-regulated and licensed, we at least ought to look at why we are failing people with a heroin addiction, people who use drugs recreationally and do not have an addiction problem, and the people around drug users. The hearts that are broken through heroin-related deaths go much wider than the people who use the drug.

The number of opioid-related deaths has gone up year on year since 2010. I thoroughly applaud the Minister for saying that she wants an evidence-based approach, but she appears to have ignored the conclusions and findings of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs that came out just last year. It reminded us that there were 2,479 drug-related deaths in 2015 alone, so keeping drugs illegal is clearly not preventing death.

Among the report’s findings was this:

“That the UK has high-quality systems for the recording of opioid-related deaths,”—

which is good—

“but that more could be done to improve national information, especially on toxicology and prescribing, as well as on the contribution of opioid use to levels of mortality from other causes.”

Data collection is partially addressed by the Minister in the strategy, but I would like further information, if possible.

The report also states that

“a probable cause of the recent increases in drug-related deaths...is the existence of a prematurely ageing cohort of people who have been using heroin since the 1980s and 1990s.”

It states that other contributory causes of those recent increases are

“multiple health risks...among an ageing cohort of heroin or opioid users, deepening of socio-economic deprivation since the financial crisis of 2008, and changes to drug treatment and commissioning practices.”

The paper goes on to make some very sensible suggestions, which I urge the Minister to remind herself of. I will remind her of some of them now. It states:

“There are a number of evidence-based approaches that can be used to reduce the risk of death among people who use opioids. The strongest evidence supports the provision of opioid substitution treatment (OST) of optimal quality, dosage and duration.”

I know that the Minister is aware of that. However, the report goes on to say:

“Other substance misuse treatment options could be further developed in order to reduce the risk of death including broader provision of naloxone,”—

for hon. Members who do not know, that is a substance that can be used to halt and then reverse the effects of overdoses, thus saving lives—

“heroin-assisted treatment for those for whom other forms of OST are not effective, medically-supervised drug consumption clinics, treatment for alcohol problems, and assertive outreach to engage heroin users who are not in treatment into OST (especially for those who are homeless and/or have mental health problems).”

We are all harmed by a failure to address those issues. We are harmed when we are troubled by the homeless person on the street who is clearly suffering; by the relative or friend of a friend who goes without the treatment that they need; or by someone who dies needlessly of an overdose when it could have been prevented by safe use in a drug consumption clinic, accompanied by counselling to try to engage that person in drug cessation. I want us to notice that we are all harmed by that, not just those who are using drugs.

The strategy recognises the record high levels of deaths and drug misuse and it makes some recommendations, such as that all local areas should have appropriate naloxone provision in place, but the Bristol Drugs Project, which has such a distribution system, tells me that it is unable to get to everyone who is at risk of heroin overdose. I would like it to have the funding it needs to reach more people and prevent more deaths. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs also recommended the drug consumption clinics that I have mentioned, and discussions with people in the sector and with other specialists lead me to believe that investing in drug consumption spaces, where drug users can have their drugs tested, receive counselling and, above all, consume drugs safely and with no associated harms to the rest of us, would be money well invested or at least worth exploring further. We would gain in the reduced cost to emergency services, local council cleaning services and the prevention of drug-related deaths.

I turn to the obvious contradictions in our laws on alcohol and other drugs. On criminalisation, the ACMD has mixed views, but the Government are unequivocal—they are opposed to reforming the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The strategy states:

“We have no intention of decriminalising drugs. Drugs are illegal because scientific and medical analysis has shown they are harmful to human health”—

I do not disagree. It continues:

“Drug misuse is also associated with much wider societal harms including family breakdown, poverty, crime and anti-social behaviour.”

Those I would qualify. As others have said, and I reiterate, that argument simply does not hold water. The research review carried out by Professor David Nutt for *The Lancet* shows that alcohol is by far the most dangerous drug in the UK for harms to others and harms to the user. It is far more harmful to other people than any other drug, including heroin, crack, methamphetamine, cocaine, cannabis and tobacco, but it is regulated, with licensing conditions and ways to protect users if it is their drug of choice.

The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) mentioned the awful people who deal in drugs and use violence. I agree: I want to protect my constituents from falling prey to that violence and abuse. She also mentions the harms that vulnerable people suffer when they are forced to traffic drugs. I agree, and I want to avoid those harms, but I respectfully disagree with her—it is the criminal nature of the drugs trade that causes those harms. That is my interpretation of the evidence, and I urge hon. Members to consider the suggestion by the hon. Member for Reigate of a royal commission to examine that further.

If we are to take an approach of making a substance illegal because scientific and medical analysis has shown it is harmful to human health, we need to make alcohol and tobacco illegal. Are the Government proposing that?

No, they are not, and I do not want them to. I would simply invite them to consider that their entire rationale for maintaining the legal status quo is undermined by that. It would be far more effective to tackle the harms done to others and to the user to review the entire criminal law associated with alcohol and other drugs, and to consider reforming it to make it truly evidence based.

Before I conclude, I want to add some comments and caveats on the wider social rationale. Some people think—and some hon. Members have implied it today—that drug harms are the responsibility of the individual and, if people choose to use drugs, they should be left to take the consequences without the taxpayer having to pick up the tab. I know that the Minister does not agree with that approach and I am glad about that. To those people, I say that we are all picking up the tab anyway—in the huge costs of policing drug use, accidental overdose and so on. We are also picking up the tab when people in our own lives are harmed by drugs. It is no use saying that it is always someone else’s child, parent or sibling. Many sober people who have never taken any drugs are affected by a relative or friend’s drug use, whether cash is stolen from them to pay for drug use or in having to deal with the impact of overdoses or the health consequences of substances added to drugs.

The social and economic cost of drug supply in England and Wales is estimated to be £10.7 billion a year, just over half of which—£6 billion—is attributed to drug-related acquisitive crime. Would that we could reform that—and I think the Minister should take this opportunity to consider that there are ways of reforming it.

I want all Members to take a moment to be quite imaginative. I want them to imagine the nature of the shops that currently exist for people to buy drugs if they wish to. Those drug shops are already all around us, but they are dangerous, they are illegal, they are unregulated, they are untaxed and they are unlicensed, unless your drug of choice is alcohol.

Why do we not decide to do something different with that £10.7 billion a year? Why do we not decide that we will treat drug misuse as a health and social problem rather than a criminal problem, and direct the funds towards treatment and recovery for those who need it? Why do we not also recognise that the harms done by legal drugs are in excess of those done by illegal drugs, and decide to reduce or even end the harms caused by the illegal nature of some of those drugs? I want Members to focus their minds on the harms done by the drugs rather than by a legal situation which could be reformed.

Why do we not acknowledge that some people are consuming both harmful illegal drugs and legal drugs right now, but at least those consuming legal drugs will be doing so in the knowledge that the strength and purity of the substance that they are consuming is regulated, so they can make informed choices? Why do we not become really brave, and decide that if we are going to treat alcohol and tobacco in a certain way—and yes, rightly provide education and information to help people to make those informed choices, and treatment for those whose consumption has started to harm them or others—we should provide parity of protection, information and education in relation to other drugs?

Let me very clear about this. There is no safe level of consumption of any drug, be it legal or otherwise. The only way to be completely safe from the harms of

[Thangam Debbonaire]

consumption of any drug, including alcohol, is not to consume it at all. Having access to good-quality information gives people the opportunity to make evidence-informed decisions for themselves about whether and how to consume alcohol or other drugs. Relying on the law to inform decision-making is not working, It skews the decision entirely in favour of the most dangerous drug. I am sure that many people have no idea of the links between alcohol consumption and cancer, for example.

I am not suggesting that we should jump straight to full legalisation of all drugs. I am simply raising the importance of considering whether and how to revise the legal framework for all drugs. If we are to have an evidence-based system of response to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, it must focus on harm reduction. It must treat the harms as social and health harms when they are social and health harms, and as criminal only when it is necessary to treat them as such.

We urgently need the royal commission referred to by the hon. Member for Reigate, and we need to be able to have a well-informed, honest and open debate about the regulation of alcohol and other drugs in order to reduce avoidable harm, increase informed decision-making, and end the deaths caused by alcohol and all other drugs.

6.2 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): One of the joys of being called so late in the debate is being able to hear the arguments on both sides. I have found it genuinely informative, and I thank everyone for their contributions, especially those who made maiden speeches today. As a newbie myself, I can only tell them that it does get easier.

We have a very special person in the room with us today—so special, indeed, that she and her campaign have been mentioned at several points during the debate. She is a constituent of mine called Anne-Marie Cockburn, and she is the mother of a child whose name may also be familiar to Members, because she too has been mentioned today. The story is so poignant, and so relevant to everything that we are talking about, that I hope the House will indulge me and allow me to tell it more fully so that everyone can understand why so many Members included it in their speeches, albeit in passing. It is the story of Martha Fernback.

Martha died four years ago this week, on 20 July 2013, from an accidental drug overdose. She was 15. That fateful day, she was out with her friends on a Saturday morning to go to a kayaking club; she was too young for the other sort. She took—because it was so readily available—half a gram of Ecstasy powder, and almost immediately started to react. At first, her friends did not know what to do. They were worried that they would get into trouble, so they hesitated in ringing the ambulance when it was clear that Martha was struggling. But they did. Then Anne-Marie got the call that every parent dreads. An unrecognised number came up on her mobile phone screen; she was called to go to the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford. Just two hours after first taking the drug, Martha, her beautiful baby girl, died.

What is most extraordinary about this story is that the drug was 91% pure—way above the national average at the time. Martha thought that she was being safe.

She tried to protect herself. After her death, Anne-Marie looked at her online history. Martha knew that she wanted to experiment and she knew that there were risks, so she did her research. She had some of the information, which said beware of impurities, but that was not the whole story, as the information was not out there about safe dosage. Besides, she had no idea what she was taking. In a sense, the drug was almost too pure. So she accidentally took too much.

Anne-Marie was a wonderful mother. Martha was her only child—her world. They were close. In fact, Martha confided to her mum that she wanted to experiment—as a teacher, I can tell Members that that is very rare—and Anne-Marie did exactly what we all tell parents to do. She told Martha to “Just say no”. With hindsight, Anne-Marie is clear, and she argues, as part of the Anyone’s Child campaign, that, had Martha taken something legally regulated, with labelled dosage and clear safety information, she could have made a fully informed choice—not a partially informed choice—and, who knows, may even have decided not to do it.

Martha wanted to get high. She did not want to die. Perhaps if she had had all the information, she could have done for herself what her mother could not, and still be with us today.

The story is heart-breaking—I am sure that is why so many Members have referred to it today—but it makes an important point. Ecstasy is already banned, yet such stories still happen. The blanket ban approach is just doing more of the same. It fixes nothing of the core issue and is the wrong approach. Rather than banning and punishing, we should be regulating and educating. Taking drugs should be a public health issue, not a criminal offence, and I am so happy to hear so many Members make that point in the House today. Stories such as Martha’s happen because we refuse to accept that teenagers will always want to take risks. We talk about sending a clear message. How do we best get a teenager to do something? It is by telling them not to do it. I am a teacher and I have educated more than a thousand teenagers. Believe me, if I could wrap every one of them in a protective blanket and shield them from the harm of this world, I would, but if they will not do as you say—and they frequently do not—at least let them be safe in what they do.

Martha’s story is terrifying. It is natural to want to clamp down and stop it happening to anyone at all ever. I have immense sympathy for those who believe that that is the right approach. To hear the Home Secretary say that she wants a drug-free world is laudable, but I am afraid that I believe it is naive and it fundamentally fails to understand how teenagers really think and behave.

One of the reasons the Liberal Democrats argue for decriminalising drugs for personal use is that we want to encourage a proper debate and to encourage users to seek help. Our priority should not be to punish people caught with drugs—perhaps Martha’s friends would have called the ambulance earlier had they not felt that that was a problem. Our priority should be to increase access to treatment for anyone who is suffering from drug dependency.

It is time for us to recognise that our old approaches have not worked and to stop repeating the same mistakes of the so-called “war on drugs” time and again. We need a more constructive and evidence-based approach:

one that focuses on education and, when it is needed, on rehabilitation and treatment; and one that will finally take meaningful steps to reduce the harms that drugs have done to too many families across the country.

I urge the Government: let us be brave and open up this debate. We need to wake up and face the facts. Prohibition does not work; all it does is make a natural instinct taboo. It puts up barriers between children and their parents, and it drives the problems underground, and into the hands of drug dealers and gangs who, frankly, could not care less about children like Martha—their customers.

I urge the Government to think again. This is the wrong approach. It did not help Martha then and it will not help others like her now, or in the future.

6.10 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): This has been a powerful and moving debate, and I am proud to be a part of it. I congratulate all my fellow new Members who have made their maiden speeches today. We are fresh-faced people from the outside coming into this place, bringing our experience as part of our communities, and, I am afraid, that experience will always include drugs.

My initial interest in drugs policy came about from my work over 18 years for the shop workers' union USDAW. That was not because shop workers are selling drugs, but because they are suffering from them. Our drugs policy is failing, and it is not just drug users and their families who suffer from our failure.

Behind the statistic of £6 billion of losses from crime and antisocial behaviour due to drugs, there are thousands of innocent people working on the frontline who suffer far worse than economic loss. I welcome the fact that we now have a drugs strategy, and the commitment to better drugs education in our schools. I say that as a parent of four children.

I live in the beautiful rural constituency of High Peak: small market towns and villages, lovely houses, picturesque countryside. But even in beautiful High Peak, we have a problem with drugs. We see it when we are out in the evening, in our parks, on street corners, or even in the mornings when our children are on their way to school. I was even approached when out canvassing last month.

It is such a widespread problem that we do not have the police to deal with it, even before the huge cuts to our police numbers, let alone the necessary number of courts or prison places. That way of proceeding is not only impractical, however; it is also expensive and ineffective, and creates criminals out of people who need help, not harm.

The associated antisocial behaviour from drug and alcohol abuse in our towns and cities is affecting the quality of life of all our residents, shoppers and retailers. No one agency is able to tackle this problem alone, so they feel they have nowhere to turn. Derbyshire police and crime commissioner is leading multi-agency working of enforcement agencies, local authorities, businesses and voluntary organisations, so they are working in partnership. There have been positive outcomes already, and all sectors will benefit from the work they do. Drug services have joined up with those delivering alcohol, mental health and homelessness services, and have welcomed the intervention by the PCC, who has helped

to set up specialist drugs workers in a local charity, with financial contributions from partner agencies, and soon from local businesses as well.

So many of us are affected, and that means that there is support from all quarters—from communities, parents, young people, shop workers, emergency service workers and businesses—for effectively tackling our drugs problems. Like other Members, I urge the Minister to be bold, and not to be tied to the policies of the past or to think that there is not support for funding drug policies. When there is £2.50 of benefit for every pound of spending on tackling our drug problem, people see the need, as well as the sense and the benefits, of an effective policy. The cuts to drug treatment budgets of up to 50% in some areas are a false economy. Drug policy needs ring-fenced funding and we need policies that work. This is too urgent and widespread a problem for us to tiptoe around it any longer.

I urge the Government to be bold in accepting the well-researched scientific evidence from their own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Its evidence shows that many drug users need to be persuaded to accept treatment. Most drug users do not see their using as a problem, and do not see the need for treatment. I am afraid that treatment is not everything, however. Independent research from the University of Manchester shows that those who leave treatment drug-free are just as likely to die of an overdose as those who do not. Risk of fatal overdose is at its highest in the four weeks after leaving opiate substitute treatment—almost four times the risk while in treatment. Treatment does not work for everyone, and it is sometimes more damaging than no treatment. Although there are tragedies, many people manage to get by while using drugs, and they often get by quite well, especially if they are supported. I therefore very much welcome the Government's support through housing policy in the drug strategy.

There was not much that I supported in the last Conservative manifesto, and I was not alone in that. However, I do support the proposal for national insurance holidays to support small and medium-sized businesses in taking on people in hard-to-reach groups, especially those who are users or ex-users of drugs. People who are in employment are twice as likely to manage their drug use as those who are not. I applaud this forward-thinking policy, which has the support of the Federation of Small Businesses, and I will support the Government in bringing it forward.

Drug taking is a serious problem in every corner of our land, from the picturesque rural villages of High Peak to our city centres, and we need to work together to maximise our effectiveness and the funding available. I hope that there will be a representative of the Treasury on the new drugs council that the Minister mentioned, and that the council can persuade the Treasury of the cost-effectiveness of ring-fenced funding. We can afford to adopt a decent, far-thinking, science-based policy for harm reduction from drugs. We cannot afford not to.

6.17 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I would like to thank hon. and right hon. Members for this incredibly wide-ranging, well-informed and thoughtful debate on this important issue. The Government's strategy was so packed with Home Office jargon and an avoidance of any real commitment that the debate has been helpful in determining what exactly they intend to do. I will come

[Louise Haigh]

back to that point shortly, but first I want to congratulate those hon. Members who have spoken out so bravely today on an issue that is often toxic and difficult to debate honestly. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made that point eloquently, and that is why his idea for a royal commission has been seized on so fervently by Members on both sides of the House. That would allow us the space to develop a truly evidence-based policy and to take the heat out of the debate and shed some light on it instead.

I particularly want to congratulate the five Members who have made their maiden speeches today. It has been an honour and a privilege to sit and listen to them. I cringe when I compare my maiden speech two years ago with those of the warriors for their constituencies who have spoken today. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) made a particularly inspiring maiden speech as the first turbaned Sikh to represent any constituency in this Parliament. He will be a beacon of hope not only for those who look like him but for all the others who do not see faces that represent them in Parliament at this time. He talked about the glass ceiling that has been shattered by his election, and I look forward to many more glass ceilings being shattered in the months and years to come.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—who is not yet back in her place—made an inspiring, witty and entertaining speech. I am confident that she will have no less an impact on her city than did any of her predecessors. As a former primary school teacher, she spoke with a passionate voice about the education system, which is so important and welcome in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) gave a compassionate speech about the victims of the drug policies of successive Governments and spoke bravely about her experience as an MP. It is so important that others join her in calling out the kind of abuse that she talked about today. I welcome the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) from the Government Benches. He gave us an enjoyable history and, indeed, language lesson, but I am afraid to say that I had absolutely no idea what he was saying when he spoke in his local potteries dialect. Finally, the mark of my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) has clearly already been felt in his constituency, and I am confident that it will continue to be felt. He made a thoughtful and thorough contribution, which I am sure will be the first of many.

There were too many speeches for me to summarise them all, but I want to touch on the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Both of them spoke about the case of Martha Fernback and the bravery of her parents—I believe that they are with us today—who came forward after the tragic death of their daughter. They referred to the importance of education about safe dosage and purity levels, issues which we come back to time and time again, and to the case for legal regulations and clear safety information, which would enable full informed choices that could save lives.

I hope that today's important debate is the start of a wider debate around drugs policy because, as has been said, very little progress has been made under successive

Governments over the past few years. Unfortunately, however, the drug strategy that was announced last week does not advance us any further. We should not forget that the Government's 2010 drug strategy was essentially ripped up in 2013 when they ended the ring-fencing of drug rehabilitation and treatment services and passed the responsibility to local authorities, which were already facing deep cuts. I regret to say that the strategy does not appear to even recognise, let alone respond to, a climate that has utterly changed since the previous publication.

Despite the strategy being so long overdue, the Government undertook no formal consultation in its development. Where are the voices of drug users, law enforcement officers and treatment professionals? Their voices must be heard, and each and every one of them will tell us that the status quo is not working. It is not working for the desperately vulnerable cohort of heroin and opioid users with increasingly complex health needs who are falling between the gaps of reduced drug rehabilitation services and a social care service in crisis. It is not working for the homeless community, where 95% of the population are said to be drug users and who are given scant support. It is not working for the victims of drug-related crime. It is certainly not working for our public services, particularly our police and emergency services, which are being left to pick up the pieces as services of last resort as the substance use that demands their attention soars.

Since the publication of the last strategy, drug-related deaths have risen and the number of drug users has not fallen. In addition, drug-related crime has placed increased pressure on all public services, including the NHS and the police. The figures for drug-related deaths should shame us all. In 2013, there were 2,955 drug-related deaths. In 2015, there were 3,674 deaths—a new record. That is a record of failure from this Government and their immediate predecessor. Worse still, the recommendations of the Government's own advisory council are being ignored. The report by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs stated that factors such as

“socio-economic changes (including cuts to health and social care, welfare benefits and local authority services) and changes in treatment services and commissioning practices may also have contributed to these increases.”

It suggested that deaths could be reduced by protecting “investment in evidence-based drug treatment to promote recovery”, investing in the

“provision of medically supervised drug consumption clinics in localities with a high concentration of injecting drug use” and through the roll-out of heroin-assisted treatment for addicts. Finally, it raised concerns that

“drug treatment and prevention services in England are planned to be among those public health services that receive the most substantial funding cuts as a consequence of the government's decision to cut the public health grant”.

Those warnings and recommendations were completely and utterly ignored in this week's drugs strategy, which offers no new investment and few new ideas. It is a grim feature of this Government that the experts are ignored when they raise the alarm.

Where do we stand on the Government's current drugs strategy? Is it evidence-based, bringing in the widest possible array of expert opinion in formulating policy? Is it logical, identifying the necessary steps to

achieve the optimal possible outcome? Is it achievable, and have the resources been provided that can make a significant difference? I am afraid it is none of those things.

It is not clear that there has been any meaningful wide-ranging consultation process, or that experts across the field have been heeded. It is not clear, either, that policy has been formulated based on evidence, given the deteriorating drug-related mortality rate and the UK's uniquely poor performance in that regard. Crucially, have any new resources been provided, or is there any intention to develop new ideas that would make a significant difference to outcomes? It appears not.

To take just one example, the Government's drugs strategy document blithely states that

"local authority public health teams should take an integrated approach to reducing a range of alcohol related harm, through a combination of universal population level interventions and interventions targeting at risk groups."

Alcohol is the biggest single killer when it comes to drugs. Alcohol abuse ruins lives, leads to crime, especially violent crime, and is a prevalent factor in domestic abuse. Its treatment is a huge drain on the NHS, but any local councillor or mayor, from whatever party, will be amazed at the Government's sheer brass neck in demanding that they do more to tackle alcohol and drug abuse when their budgets have been cut to the bone. This is not localism; it is the devolution of austerity and the shifting of responsibility and blame.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Lancashire constabulary, due to cuts, has taken the mental health worker out of its police response unit.

Sarah Newton: That is out of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I reassure the Minister that that is not the case. It is for the Chair to decide. Thanks for your help, but you are wrong.

Graham Jones: Lancashire constabulary, because of budget cuts, has had to remove the mental health workers who were embedded in its police response unit. Is that not an example of the Government asking for something to be done while undermining local authorities, which are unable to deliver these services?

Louise Haigh: The vast majority of the drugs strategy is simply about shifting blame on to authorities and agencies that have seen their budgets fall and squeezed over the last seven years.

Although we welcome the creation of the national recovery champion, what good is a national recovery champion while the Government are cutting local authority budgets, ending the ring fence on public health, slashing police resources, cutting back on school funding and reducing the resources available to prevention campaigns, while mental health waiting lists are through the roof? Help is increasingly inaccessible.

It is not even clear that Ministers have a clear picture of the drugs problem overall. Complacently, they point to survey evidence that suggests drug misuse is not increasing, yet both drug-related hospital admissions and deaths are on the increase. Has the Minister considered that the survey evidence may not be fully accurate,

especially given that it is confined to 16 to 59-year-olds but drug deaths among 50 to 69-year-olds have risen sharply? Drug deaths in the latter group have doubled in the last eight years in England and Wales, according to the Office for National Statistics. We respectfully suggest that the age categories in the survey should be broadened. Will the Minister today commit to the continuation of the British crime survey, which measures these statistics, so that these data continue to be collected?

There are several other important evidence gaps in the drugs strategy. The Government clearly do not have a firm grip on what is happening to the supply of drugs, on how much and what types of drugs are being imported, on how much and what types of drugs are being produced domestically or on the distribution chains. That important data mapping might be easier if the Government had not cut 1,000 Border Force guards and more than 20,000 police officers over the past seven years. Nevertheless, this remains an important task in the fight against illicit drugs and organised crime. The National Crime Agency should be tasked with providing the data on supply—of course, it also needs to be given the resources to do so.

Here we come to the nub of the entire problem with the Government's drugs strategy. They have provided no new resources to meet the rising problems related to drugs and drug addiction. As a result, all that is left are warm words about the need for treatment and rehabilitation, and, in some instances, outright contradiction. One such example is the Government pledging to develop Jobcentre Plus offices in communities to support people with drug dependencies, but at the exact same time the Department for Work and Pensions is cutting hundreds of jobcentres across the country. Unfortunately, this adds up to a recipe for failure. It means that addicts will not receive the treatment they need; that we are likely to remain the overdose capital of Europe; that we will have a continuing problem of drug-related crime and drug-related hospital admissions; and that greater numbers of people will drift through the criminal justice system who should not be treated as criminals at all. Without the space for innovative ideas, debate and practices to thrive, we will continue to exacerbate all these issues, and we all will have failed.

6.30 pm

Sarah Newton: Before I respond to the substantial questions and items in today's debate, I wish to pay tribute to the excellent maiden speeches we have heard. I shall start with the excellent speech from the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) about Slough's bright future as the silicon valley of the UK. I am sure he also has a very bright future in this House, and not just because of the bright colours of his turbans. This is a very proud day for our democracy as a glass ceiling has been shattered. He spoke so powerfully about belonging, and everyone, from all parts of the House, wants to welcome him so that he feels that he truly belongs in this mother of all Parliaments.

It was also a great pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), whose great maiden speech described the history and the potential of Stoke, and the role it is playing in global Britain. I am sure he will represent Stoke-on-Trent as a powerful advocate for innovation and all those growing businesses there that he so well described. I am also sure we are all going to be lifting up mugs, plates and any other items we buy to look for the

[Sarah Newton]

words “Made in Stoke-on-Trent” on them. I share with him a strong link to his constituency, because the china clay that is mined in Cornwall is taken to the potteries and has helped to create those iconic brands such as Wedgwood that he mentions. I am very much looking forward to working with him in the weeks, months and years ahead.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who spoke so powerfully about the importance of making a sacrifice so that we can make the powerful difference we want to see in our country and the sacrifice that our families make to enable us to do that. I am sure her daughters will be so proud of her. Having heard her speech today, I am sure nobody will ever underestimate her or Hull again.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) also spoke powerfully about the scourge of drug use, and the need to look at the root cause of why people take drugs and then to support them on the road to recovery. She is obviously very proud of her constituency, its history, its people and its culture. My sister is a nurse, and I know what powerful advocates nurses are for their patients. I am sure she will be a great advocate for all her constituents.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), who spoke of his passion to help marginalised people in Ipswich choose a life free of drugs, and I look forward to working with him in that vital task. It is good to hear that he wants to build on the work of Ben Gummer, his predecessor, in improving the local economy and the opportunities there, particularly the rail links, and I wish him well during his time in Parliament.

I will try to cover in as much detail as I can in the remaining time the issues, questions and challenges that have been posed about the strategy. I welcome the fact that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) welcomed the strategy and recognised some of the achievements of the 2010 strategy. In doing that, she rightly wanted to know what more we are doing in prisons and rightly pointed out the real problem we have with drug use in prisons. I want to reassure her about the actions that are going on now to support prison officers in tackling this dreadful problem. We are enhancing the drug-testing regime, supporting governors by recruiting new officers to our prison estate, looking at how prisons can co-commission drug services with the NHS locally, ensuring that the parameters of prisons are more secure and maintained and improving the searching capability of dedicated teams. It is really important that I have this chance to point out that we are taking a comprehensive series of actions to prevent prisons from being a place where people can readily access drugs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made a really important contribution to this debate. The fact that we have allowed this debate in Government time—we have had a really good debate with a wide-ranging discussion—demonstrates our commitment to getting this policy area right. We have published a lot of data, which my hon. Friend mentioned. We have worked with a wide range of stakeholders to inform our evidence-based strategy, and we will continue to do so.

My hon. Friend and others have asked whether we will be evaluating the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. We are already doing so. We have published the framework for that evaluation so people can contribute, and we will be publishing the findings in 2018. We are determined to be an open, evidence-based policy team. We do look very closely at the work of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, as it is the key Government adviser. It is simply not true to say that we have not taken on board all the recommendations that it has made. It has made a really important contribution to this strategy, and will continue to do so going forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate also talked very movingly—as did a number of hon. Friends—about the stigma around this issue. He was absolutely right. I have met many parents of families myself. I went along to a very moving service in Westminster Abbey only a month or so ago organised by Adfam. I encourage everyone who has a family member struggling with substance misuse to seek that help, to go to their GP, and to pick up the phone to the helplines that are available because they will receive support on how to manage their issues and their substance abuse problems.

Fiona Bruce *rose*—

Sarah Newton: I will give way briefly, but I do want to cover the points.

Fiona Bruce: Does the Minister agree that effective treatment means helping those who are suffering addiction to come off the substance to which they are addicted? It is not just about managing their situation, which might mean being dependent on a different substance.

Sarah Newton: We have a broad range of strategies, and I will come on to talk about harm reduction, because, clearly, it has a role to play. The ultimate goal is to enable people to have a drug-free life in which they have a job and are playing a full part in society, but there is a role for harm reduction.

Norman Lamb *rose*—

Sarah Newton: I am sorry, but I have very little time. If I can make some progress, I will give way.

Many Members talked about how concerned they were that the police and the criminal justice system were criminalising a whole generation of young people. I can absolutely assure Members that, having spent a lot of time with police officers, that is simply not the case. The police are very, very sensitive to the need not to do that. We have a wide range of options available to police officers and the courts, so that young people in the criminal justice system can be referred straight to health solutions, diversion services and treatment. It is only as a last resort, often with persistent offending, that the criminal justice solution is sought.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) talked about the need for class A drugs, such as heroin, to be used in treatment and recovery programmes. I can assure him that that is absolutely what happens. That was the recommendation that ACMD made and the drugs are available. However, that is quite different from just making a space available for people to take drugs. Having heard the evidence of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), it is really important that if people are to be taking heroin it must be part of

a treatment programme with recovery as the end point. I have been to the facilities and seen for myself how people are given clean needles and support and advice, but it is medically led by a doctor. That was a point that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) made, and it was reflected in the advice that we took from the ACMD.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) talked powerfully about the issue being a matter of social justice, and she is absolutely right. The strategy addresses the problems that she articulated so well of children living in homes with parents who have substance abuse problems, whether we are talking about alcohol or drugs. It is important that we take a joined-up approach to make sure that those families are really supported. She also mentioned the important issue of cheap alcohol and white cider. I very much supported the action that the Treasury is taking in consulting on increasing taxation; that consultation is under way, and I am sure that we will hear the results in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) spoke powerfully, drawing on her experience of the serious organised criminals who bring the most harmful drugs into our country. She is absolutely right to highlight the human trafficking and appalling abuse of children that happens in bringing the drugs into our country. The same gangs exploit vulnerable people in our country in order to traffic these drugs around the country. She is right to draw on her experience, and on the view shared by many in the criminal justice system that we need to work globally, through the United Nations and our partners, and share data to prevent these drugs from arriving on our shores.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) spoke about the difficulties of families. I really hope that Martha's mum, who is here, sees how seriously we take the loss of any child. As a mother of three children, I just cannot imagine the horror of getting that phone call to say that I had lost one of my children. I want to reassure her; I hope that she sees, from the nature of this debate, how seriously the Government and everyone in the House take the issue. We want to work against the stigma that families face, so that they can speak out and get the help that they need. I hope that she is somewhat reassured by the strategy's emphasis on the good advice and information that should be readily available to young people, so that they understand the risks of all drugs, including alcohol, tobacco, and other substances that they might be tempted to take. A lot of progress has been made in the four years since Martha's tragic death.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) made a point that he also raised at Home Office questions last week. Winging its way to him is a detailed written response to that question. I recognise the picture that he describes in his community. It is something that I faced in Truro last year. What I saw there is that, as he has discovered, not everybody—not all police officers or people in local authorities—has all the information about the powers that they have to work as a team to tackle these issues. In my letter to him, I describe what I think he can do, and the advocacy and agency that he can bring to bear in getting all the partners together in Wrexham to work on the issue.

I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on the funding for the testing that police officers need to do of substances that they find on people in order to get convictions.

That testing regime is well supported by and funded by the Home Office, but as I say, I will write to him in a lot more detail.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) spoke passionately about the work of Elizabeth Brice and her campaign for the medicinal use of cannabis. I want to assure him and all Members in the House that there is access to medicinal cannabis. It can be used for a wide range of ailments and can be very beneficial. Sativex, for example, is licensed for use. It has been raised with me before that our regime for enabling pharmaceutical companies or medical researchers to use licensed drugs is letting people down, so I have asked the Department of Health and the ACMD to look at this. We have not seen any evidence that the current regime is a barrier to people using banned drugs in medical research, but if the hon. Gentleman has that evidence and wants to send it to me, of course we will review that.

The term “war on drugs” was used repeatedly in the debate, most passionately by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, who spoke with customary eloquence, but also by the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). I just want to say that I have never used that term, and it appears nowhere in the strategy. It is simply not the Government’s policy to have a “war on drugs,” so I hope that we can sort that out once and for all. We have a far-reaching, cross-Government policy focused on the health harms of drugs, the underlying social reasons why people take drugs, and trying to prevent them, right through to the criminal justice system. We are taking a balanced, full-Government, integrated approach. I can assure hon. Members that we always look at evidence from around the world, so the evidence from Portugal has been considered.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw quite rightly said that if we are absolutely serious about reducing the number of deaths from heroin, especially among those who have been taking it for some time—and we certainly are; no Minister wants the number of deaths to increase on their watch—we must have an evidence-based approach. I honestly think that the strategy will tackle that. We do recognise that naloxone can play a vital role in saving lives, as he said, and that there is a good evidence base for that. The strategy that was published commits us to the wider use of that in saving lives.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw also described the excellent work that was done in Bassetlaw up until 2013. That is just the sort of local response that we want to see, with all the agencies working together. The drug champion will of course have a vital role, travelling across the country, finding best practice and sharing it with those communities that perhaps do not have as good an understanding of how to tackle the issue. The strategy board, which will be chaired by the Home Secretary, will include representation from NHS England, Public Health England and the police—a whole range of expertise. They will work together to develop measurable outcome frameworks, which of course we will share over time as they are developed, and we can hold each other to account for their delivery.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) claimed that the Government are ignoring the recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs with regard to deaths from heroin. That is simply not the case. We have taken all of its recommendations into consideration in forming the

[Sarah Newton]

strategy. We have a good, constructive, ongoing relationship—I meet the chairman regularly. I am sure that the work of the board, led by the Home Secretary, will be informed by the ACMD's really excellent work.

The Home Office and Public Health England jointly set up some heroin and crack cocaine action areas. The piloting we did in Middlesbrough gave some good ideas about how to move in the right direction, and that is referenced in the strategy. Despite the claims made by some colleagues on the Opposition Benches, there has been a lot of innovation in recent years, and we very much want to build on that. We need only look at the excellent clinical advice that has been developed by Public Health England to help clinicians have a much more nuanced and effective approach to understanding the different types of people who suffer from drug misuse and the different types of drugs they use, and therefore to have a more tailored approach to helping them on the road to recovery.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister, who has responded to all the challenges in a tolerant and civilised way. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) proposed that we have a royal commission in order to take the heat and the politics out of this matter and look dispassionately at all the arguments. Will the Minister at least consider that?

Sarah Newton: I just do not agree that politics is driving the issue. Our approach is totally evidence-based. If we were worried and felt unable to talk about the problem, as some have characterised us this afternoon, the Government would not have given a whole afternoon of debate to it. I accept the sincerely held views of hon. Members who do not agree with the Government, but that does not mean that our policy is not based on evidence. We are happy to debate the issue; there will be other opportunities and I will welcome those.

The pivotal role of Parliament is to scrutinise the work of the Executive and take on some of the difficult issues in our society. I am proud of our work together in the last Parliament on destigmatising mental health issues. A lot of people in this place were prepared to talk about those issues from personal experience and also with a huge amount of evidence. It is fair to say that there has been a huge culture change in our country. By talking about drug addiction and substance abuse problems, as we have today, we will contribute to a destigmatisation. As a result, more people will come forward. Families will be saved appalling loss and communities will be saved the blight of the criminal activity that goes along with this issue.

Crispin Blunt: If a royal commission looked into this matter, I hope that it would consider not only what is happening in the United Kingdom. This is a global problem that needs a global policy to address it. The sand is shifting under our feet as other nations begin to change their policies. If there were a royal commission, the United Kingdom could do some thought leadership about what is happening around the world.

Sarah Newton: I thoroughly agree that we must approach this matter from a global point of view. That is the fourth strand of the policy—the global strand. It is

about working thoroughly and consistently with colleagues at the United Nations and globally, and looking at the evidence base. Actually, some other countries look to us as leaders in this area, especially on psychoactive substances. We are global Britain. We are always out looking and working in partnership with other countries and we will look at the evidence base from them.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I am going to make a little more progress if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) touched on the issue of resources. Having a good, well implemented strategy requires resources, of course. There was a lot of misunderstanding about funding this afternoon. The Public Health England budget is ring-fenced. Yes, it is given to local authorities, which need to make decisions, based on consultation with and the health needs of their communities, about the allocation of resources. If some local authorities are disinvesting, that is sad to hear, because we put the evidence out there and the benefits of investment in good recovery services are clear—not just to the individuals concerned, but to the whole community.

I expect local authorities to use their ring-fenced budgets for public health for those services. But there is not just that budget. The Government have made record sums available for mental health services, and the national health budget is growing. The homelessness prevention funding has been ring-fenced and there is investment in innovative ways of working on homelessness prevention. There has also been the troubled families funding. The issue is about joining up those funds so that we can use the money in a smart way and tailor it to the needs of each family and person—they are all different—so that we can be really effective.

Ruth George: All the funds that the Minister mentioned are stretched beyond compare, especially the mental health funding. Yes, public health funding is ring-fenced, but it has been cut by £85 million. Drug treatment services are being cut, I am afraid, even though there is increased need.

Sarah Newton: What I see when I go around the country is a great deal of innovation where people are learning to use their resources more effectively.

One of the very important jobs of the champion is to look at what is happening well in parts of the country where people are not disinvesting in services and have excellent examples of partnership working. I praise the work that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) is doing in really getting into the weeds in her community and understanding this issue. In doing so, she knows that it is only by joining up all the services in the community and involving employers that we are going to make the step change that we need to see. I am very clear—

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I only have a few minutes left.

I am very clear that this is a very ambitious policy. It has been based on evidence. It has been some time in the coming because we have looked at reports and

research that has been done, particularly by the ACMD, to inform what we are doing. I absolutely want to put it beyond doubt that we see this strategy as joining up health, social and crime areas. It is a completely joined-up approach to government. We are trying to help people into recovery. The health interventions that people have so rightly spoken about are absolutely critical to the success of this strategy.

The strategy board will meet when we get back in the autumn. I am sure that Members will see that we have many opportunities to debate the outcomes framework that we will be putting forward, and we will hear about the really good work that the recovery champion is going to do. I hope that Members in all parts of the House will engage with the recovery champion, share the good work that is going on in their constituencies, and share their concern where things are not working, because let us be in no doubt—this is a complex issue that is going to require a huge amount of effort in every community in every part of our country. Despite our views on whether we should criminalise or not criminalise, we are all united in wanting to end the pain and suffering that is caused to too many people and too many communities by the use of drugs.

Paul Flynn: I would like to make a brief contribution, Madam Deputy Speaker, because there are four minutes to go.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): No—the Minister has summed up the debate.

Paul Flynn: There are four minutes to go.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Flynn—are you making a point of order, because you cannot argue with the Chair across the Chamber?

Paul Flynn: I am not arguing with the Chair—I am arguing that the Minister has finished and I want to make a small contribution. Those are the normal rules of debate.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Flynn, you have already made a contribution and the Minister has chosen not to take an intervention. She has concluded and the debate is thus concluded.

Paul Flynn: May I make a point of order, then, Madam Deputy Speaker, because the excuse that the Minister gave—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Flynn—I am about to put the Question. You may make a point of order after I have put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered drugs policy.

Paul Flynn: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will have heard the Minister say that she could not take a brief intervention from me because of lack of time. Could I just make the point that the Government's policy is not evidence-based, because otherwise they would be taking clear cognisance of the evidence from Portugal and from Uruguay—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I must stop the hon. Gentleman. He has been in this House for a very long time and he knows that is not a point of order for the Chair. He wishes to continue the debate, but the debate has lasted for some hours and it is now finished.

PETITION

Removal of greenfield sites in Bulkington from Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Plan

6.58 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I rise on behalf of the residents of Bulkington in my constituency in relation to the inclusion of two sites in their village, referenced HSG7 and HSG8, in the local plan prepared by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and submitted to the Planning Inspectorate on 6 June. The petition has been organised by Bulkington Residents Voice, a group hastily assembled to oppose the addition of those sites to the local plan, and it has been signed by 1,490 local residents, which is almost one in three of the local population.

The petition states that the two sites in Bulkington were added at a late stage in the preparation of the local plan, giving residents no time to prepare and submit objections; further, that Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council did not make any attempt to engage with or advise local residents of the addition of the sites; and, further, that the two sites would accommodate 691 houses, representing an increase of more than a quarter, and a further 2,500 residents. Both those increases are totally out of proportion with the current village setting and would lead to the loss of the village's identity.

The petition further states that there are no proposals for the additional infrastructure that development on this scale would entail; further, that there are no proposed economic improvements by way of job creation or business investment; and, further, that the sites are greenfield and located in the green belt, which is an important barrier between Nuneaton and Bulkington and where there is a presumption against development. The petition accordingly asks this House to cause Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council to remove the two sites from the local plan.

The text of the petition is as follows:

[The petition of residents of Bulkington, Warwickshire, Declares that the residents of Bulkington, Warwickshire, petition your honourable House that Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council prepared and made major policy changes to the proposed Borough Plan, without making any attempt to engage with, or advise local residents, or their representative organisation; furthermore, these changes committed inappropriate numbers of new houses to the village of Bulkington, yet this would not deliver any economic benefit to the village or more importantly to the wider Borough.

Therefore, the petitioners request that the House of Commons urges the Government to cause the Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council to remove from the Publication Version of the Borough Plan (2017–2031) the proposed developments in the existing Green Belt around Bulkington.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Lea Valley Greenhouse Glass Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Stuart Andrew.)

7.1 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a great pleasure to lead this Adjournment debate on the Lea valley greenhouse industry. You know, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you represent a large part of it, what an industry it is. There are 350 acres of glass greenhouses in the Lea valley—a magnificent sight to see. The industry employs 2,500 people and has a turnover of £500 million a year.

Let me put some more numbers into the record. You will know these, Madam Deputy Speaker, but many people will be ignorant of the facts and I want to inform their thinking about this great industry. Our glasshouse industry in the Lea valley produces 80 million cucumbers a year—75% of the UK's total cucumber production. It produces 70 million sweet peppers a year, which is more than 60% of the UK's sweet pepper production. But it does not end there. The industry produces thousands and thousands of tonnes of tomatoes, lettuce, baby leaf salad and herbs, as well as bedding plants, trees, shrubs and flowers—a smorgasbord of great things.

The Lea valley glasshouse industry also produces a huge number of aubergines. I am not particularly familiar with aubergines, but I was given a few by a greenhouse owner a few weeks ago and they were turned into moussaka by Mrs Walker. I had always thought that moussaka was an impossibly exotic dish left over from the 1970s, but it has a lot going for it. If anybody out there wants to try moussaka—a lovely, evocative word that rolls off the tongue—I advise them to get to know aubergines from the Lea valley.

I have visited these amazing greenhouses, and it is just extraordinary to see the labour and effort that goes into growing this fresh produce. One of the most beautiful things about going there is getting to see the boxes of bumblebees that are used to pollinate crops. Bumblebees are lovely creatures anyway, but to see them beetling around—if that is not mixing a metaphor—the greenhouses and pollinating really is a wonderful sight. The glasshouse industry is hugely important to the economy of the Lea valley and it is a hugely important part of this country's overall farming economy, which is why I am so pleased to see the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food here to respond to the debate.

I want to pay tribute to those who run the greenhouse industry in the Lea valley. All of them are fantastic people, and many of them are of Italian extraction. First generation Italians or their children and grandchildren run many of these amazing businesses, of which there are about 85 in the Lea valley. I am so lucky to have more than 10,000 Italians and their descendants living in my constituency. They throw a great party, we have a great town twinning event with Sutera every year and they are an absolutely fantastic group of people to know, work with and represent.

I want to discuss a couple of issues that may threaten the future of our glasshouse industry. The first relates to the vote on the EU. I am a committed Brexiteer and I know the Minister is a committed Brexiteer, as are many people in the farming community, but that is not to say that they do not have concerns. Our industry is

reliant on seasonal workers, many of whom come from eastern Europe, and they play a very positive part in the production of these amazing crops. I hope that the Minister will work with the National Farmers Union, the Lea valley glasshouse industry and other interested parties to make sure that the industry can still access the labour it needs to put this wonderful food on our tables.

There is, however, another and far darker cloud on the horizon, which is the proposed incinerator in the Rye House and Fieldes Lock area off Ratty's Lane in my constituency of Broxbourne. The planning application is for an incinerator that will burn 350,000 tonnes of rubbish. The incinerator was originally going to be on the New Barnfield site in Welwyn Hatfield, but in 2015 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government threw out that application. In doing so, he said that the alternative sites, one of which is the proposed site in my constituency, were wholly unsuitable as locations. Those were not his words, but the arguments put forward by Veolia. In 2013, Veolia identified the Ratty's Lane site as

“a safeguarded strategic rail aggregate depot”

located on a floodplain and opposite a Ramsar site, which is one of the highest designations for a protected and treasured environment. It said the site was too compact to house a 350,000 tonne incinerator, let alone the recycling part of the operation, and was not easily accessible from the road network for more than 280 lorry movements a day. However, having said all that against the site, Veolia, when it lost its planning application for New Barnfield, suddenly changed its tune and decided that the area in my constituency was after all the perfect site for its incinerator.

As the Minister will be aware, this is causing huge concern to the 85 businesses that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and I represent. This is a serious business. The interests of a French multinational such as Veolia are not unimportant, but its interests are certainly less important than those of the 85 businesses, many of which have been established for 50, 60, 70 or 80 years, that are contributing to our communities in the Lea valley.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, among others, and on the remarkable work he has done on this issue. Is he aware that many people in Roydon and Dobbs Weir in my constituency of Harlow have expressed numerous objections against this waste installation that we are all threatened with, yet all their objections seem to have been ignored?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes a number of excellent points. This application is hugely contentious. It is on the edge of Hertfordshire. I do not want it in my backyard, and up until 2015 Veolia did not want it in my backyard. However, what Hertfordshire County Council, the sponsor of the facility, is actually proposing is that all the smoke ends up in Harlow's backyard and Epping Forest's backyard, so it is your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow who are downwind and will get the fallout.

The critical point is that we have an industry that is turning over half a billion pounds a year and producing huge amounts of fresh produce that graces the restaurants

and cafeterias of the House of Commons and is to be found in the homes of millions of people up and down this country, and the producers of that food get very nervous when half of the 350 acres of glass might fall within a 5-mile radius of a 350,000-tonne incinerator. Their concerns need to be heard.

It is simply unacceptable for Hertfordshire County Council, the sponsor of the incinerator, to be the determining authority for the application. Hertfordshire both owns the contract and is the determining authority for the contract, and if it does not determine in Veolia's favour it has to pay a break-up fee of £1.2 million. This cannot be a safe decision. It cannot be a safe decision for my constituents, but it certainly cannot be a safe decision for your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow or for the 85 businesses that risk suffering the fallout from the facility.

It is no good for the Environment Agency to say, "There's no worry here. These are tall chimneys. This is not a problem." I am not saying that it will say that, but it does not matter what the Environment Agency says about this. The fact of the matter is that 85 producers are concerned that if they are downwind of this facility, they will lose contracts with supermarkets. That could be devastating. There are 2,500 jobs on the line and a half a billion pound industry.

I know that the Minister is not a miracle worker—he is pretty good, but he is not a miracle worker—and it would be unfair of me to suggest that he was, but what we do have in this Minister is a champion for the farming industry and a champion of our industry in the Lea valley. My simple request to him this evening is please to engage with the concerns of the Lea valley growers and our greenhouse industry, and please to reflect those concerns to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, because we need this application to be called in.

We need the chance to argue our case before an independent planning inspector—not just me, not just my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow and not just you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the NFU, the Lea valley growers, my constituents, my right hon. Friend's constituents and your constituents. We need the chance to argue our case before an independent inspectorate. That is what we are asking for today. Please, as our voice for agriculture, will the Minister listen to the concerns that I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow are raising today and take them to the Secretary of State, because this is a very important industry? No doubt he will have received representations from Madam Deputy Speaker, who is not allowed to speak in this debate. If she could, I am sure she would join me on these Benches.

I do not want to go on for too long. I said that I would be brief and I want to get home for my moussaka—I genuinely am having moussaka tonight. I thank my colleagues who have remained in this place for attending and for listening so intently and politely to what I have had to say on behalf of 85 businesses in the Lea valley that do an outstanding job, produce an outstanding product, employ 2,500 people and make a huge contribution to farming and agriculture in this country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Minister, I commend the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for his eloquence in putting

the case so well, and the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for supporting the case. I of course am not able to make any comment from the Chair, but if I were able to do so I would tell the House how much I am in agreement with the hon. Member for Broxbourne.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on securing the debate. I note your comments too, Madam Deputy Speaker. In your neighbouring seat, you clearly share many of his concerns and his passion for the very important Lea valley glasshouse industry.

I recognise the importance of the sector and some of the challenges it faces. For several years, I ran a glasshouse enterprise in Cornwall. I had two acres of heated glasshouses, a former tomato nursery and I grew strawberries for the best part of five years. I am therefore familiar with some of the issues and, having studied horticulture, I am familiar with the role that Lea valley enterprises play. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the Lea valley is the UK's largest cucumber and sweet pepper producer, accounting for more than 200 million pieces per annum—including 60 million cucumbers—and representing up to 75% of the UK's total cucumber production and over 60% of the UK's sweet pepper production.

Lea valley horticultural enterprises contribute some £500 million a year to the British economy and sustain 2,500 jobs annually. Today members cultivate around 120 hectares of glasshouses, extending beyond the Lea valley and across a dispersed area including London, Essex, Hertfordshire, Middlesex, Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire.

Robert Halfon: I want to pick up a different issue, although it is directly relevant to the Lea valley greenhouses, to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and to you, my wonderful constituency neighbour, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have a woodpile in Nazeing—which is part of both the Harlow and the Epping Forest constituencies—which has burned down four times in the past four years, causing massive damage to one greenhouse glass enterprise as well as local residents. Many residents feel that not enough has been done, and we cannot understand why new licences are given to new companies to "run" the woodpile site. It causes enormous damage and expense—it burned down again only recently. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to look into the matter because it has a significant effect on the Lea valley glasshouse industry.

George Eustice: I am not familiar with the issue that my hon. Friend raises, but if there are concerns about the licensing of the woodpile operation he mentions I will ask officials to look at them.

I want to point out the history of the Lea valley. The success of the Lea valley over the years has been its fantastic contribution to feeding London throughout its history. From the middle ages onwards, it served the fledgling London with wheat, hay and barley, which came through to east London. The Lea valley has fertile alluvial soil, so by the mid-18th century it had become the leading market garden for Britain, growing a wide range of field vegetables and fruits. By the mid-19th century,

[George Eustice]

the advent of the railways resulted in greater supply to London. As the population grew and the glass tax was removed in 1845, Lea valley became home to the very first greenhouses and subsequently developed its industry in everything from grapes to cucumbers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne raised the issue of labour, and I can reassure him that I am in regular contact with representatives from the farming industry, including the National Farmers Union and others, and I am picking up that concern. Indeed, it was recently the subject of a report produced by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and only last week we had a Westminster Hall debate on that very issue.

In the last 12 months the number of EU migrants to the UK has increased by about 171,000, bringing the total to more than 2.3 million. However, horticulture faces a particular challenge relating to seasonal workers, who come here for a few months and then return home. Between 1945 and 2013, a seasonal agricultural workers scheme enabled people from countries outside the European Union to work here on a temporary basis. The scheme was closed in 2013 on the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee, but we have always made it clear that we will keep the issue under review. We established a SAWS transition group, which has met regularly, and met as recently as 6 March to discuss some of the challenges that businesses are facing this year. For instance, changes in the benefits system in Poland mean that fewer Polish citizens come here, and the work being done in Bulgaria to encourage people to stay and take employment there has also had an impact.

We estimate that there are between 67,000 and 80,000 seasonal workers in the UK, and that is very important to the industry. The Home Office, which leads on the issue, has said that it intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to examine the issue of immigration in the context of the decision to leave the European Union, including the issue of so-called tier 3 low-skilled labour. We had some discussions with members of the SAWS transition group to establish when they will be able to give us accurate data for the third and fourth quarters of this year, with a view to meeting again before the end of the year to review the position. I am therefore well aware of the issue of labour, and I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will be looking closely at the issue.

One of the great things about leaving the European Union is that we will regain control, and it will be in the gift of the British Government to do whatever they choose to do. If we deem that we need additional labour in a particular area, it will be within our power to secure that labour, and to set up whatever work permit arrangements are required to satisfy our needs.

My hon. Friend dedicated most of his comments to the issue of the Hoddesdon incinerator proposal in his constituency. Applications of that kind are always incredibly contentious. I remember that, a few years ago, there were proposals for an incinerator in Cornwall, a few miles down the road from my constituency, and I am well aware of the deep-seated concern that people may feel in such circumstances. My hon. Friend made a number of flattering remarks about my knowledge of the issue. As he knows, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government would have to

lead in this regard, and planning issues are obviously a matter for the local authority in the first instance, but there is a role for the Environment Agency in a couple of areas.

As my hon. Friend also knows, Hertfordshire County Council is currently dealing with the planning application. One of the roles of the Environment Agency is to act as a statutory consultee in the planning process, and I am told that it is engaged in a dialogue with the council in that role. The agency also has a role in the environmental permitting regulations, dealing with any concerns that would arise as a result of an environment permit. I understand that it has received an application for an environmental permit, and that the application has been duly made, which means that the information has been received, but it has not yet been processed or assessed. I am told that the Environment Agency is due to start consulting on the permit application imminently and that it intends to hold a public drop-in session in due course. I understand that that consultation will take place in earnest in the weeks ahead.

I have asked the Environment Agency whether in principle there are certain issues here. It will not surprise my hon. Friend to know that it very much depends on the individual application and that it would not be appropriate for me to make any judgments on the case he described in his constituency. However, as a general point on some of the concerns about smoke, I am told that a properly constructed incinerator with the right kind of filtration would not necessarily have a problem such as he describes and residues would not necessarily be expected. I am also told that the environmental permit will assess and control emissions to air, land and water. That said, he is right that each case has to be considered on its merits. This case will be considered thoroughly on its merits. The consultation is under way. I would encourage any—

Mr Charles Walker: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He said that the application will be considered on its merits. As it currently stands, it will be considered by Hertfordshire County Council, which is both the owner of the contract and the determiner of the contract. It is impossible for anyone in my constituency, and I believe in the constituencies of Epping Forest and Harlow, to imagine that the application will be considered on its merits, given that Hertfordshire County Council, if it does not grant it, will have to pay a £1.2 million failure fee to Veolia. That is the real concern, which is why I am hoping that the Minister will help the Lea valley growers and the NFU to make representations to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for a proper independent inquiry by a planning inspector.

George Eustice: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, but he will be aware that I am not an expert on planning law and planning policy and that any such decision would be a matter for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

Robert Halfon: On that point, will my hon. Friend ensure that the consultation is open and transparent and that everyone can see exactly what is being said?

George Eustice: Yes, the consultation that the Environment Agency will conduct on the environmental permitting regulations will be an open process. As I said,

it intends to open the drop-in session to members of the public. I encourage anyone with concerns about this application, of which, according to my hon. Friends and the representations they have made, there are many in their constituencies, to contribute to the consultation that the Environment Agency is putting together. I understand that the consultation is open and that that drop-in session will take place shortly.

I recognise the points that my hon. Friends have made on this contentious issue and I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

sees a transcript of the debate. I am sure that Members will continue to make representations to him. It is ultimately for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to make any decisions along the lines that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne seeks.

Question put and agreed to.

7.28 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Wednesday 19 July 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2017.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

AVON FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Paper, entitled Statutory Inspection of Avon Fire and Rescue Authority, dated 19 July 2017.—(*Craig Whittaker.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Barnett Formula: Public Sector Pay Cap

1. **Angus Brendan MacNeil** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the removal of the public sector pay cap in Scotland on the Barnett formula if that cap is retained in England.

[900486]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, I am sure you will join me in congratulating Jamie Murray in the mixed doubles and Gordon Reid in the wheelchair doubles for ensuring that we again had Scottish champions at Wimbledon, where your enthusiasm for tennis was in evidence once again.

The Barnett formula applies to changes in UK Government funding and will not be impacted by Scottish Government decisions on public sector pay.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The Secretary of State's constituents, and mine, have benefited from the Scottish National party Government's ending of the public sector pay cap for their public sector workers in Scotland. The SNP tried to help public sector workers in England and throughout the UK by voting to end the UK public sector pay cap too. However, Scottish Tory MPs voted against helping workers in England. With the SNP helping workers in his constituency and mine, are he

and his colleagues not ashamed of voting against removing the public sector pay cap in England to help workers there? What does he have against English workers?

David Mundell: From that question, Mr Speaker, you would not think that since 2007 the SNP Government in Scotland have been responsible for public sector pay and that a public sector pay cap has applied for most of that time. As far as I am aware, the SNP Government have not lifted the public sector pay freeze in Scotland; they have announced a consultation.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): May I put on record the fact that the Scottish women's football team will play an important European championship match tonight? I wish them all the best in their endeavours.

I do not think the Secretary of State fully appreciates the sense of grievance about the pay cap among hard-working public sector workers in Scotland. The Scottish Government have declared their intention to review and end the pay cap; will he argue in the United Kingdom Government for the same policy?

David Mundell: May I first welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new place? When the new SNP leader at Westminster said that he was reluctant, I did not realise that he was going to be reluctant to do Scottish questions, or that he was going to downgrade them.

I am clear that hard decisions have to be taken on public sector pay. If the Scottish Government, in their responsibilities, are saying that they are going to increase public sector pay, they have to identify where the funds are coming from.

Tommy Sheppard: I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words, but he and I will get on a lot better in this process if he does me the courtesy of answering the question. I asked him to state his intention to argue within Cabinet and the British Government to end the pay cap in Scotland so that workers in the public sector there will get the same rate of pay for the job, whether they work for the Scottish Government or for his Government.

David Mundell: I think I did answer the hon. Gentleman's question. The Government have struck the right balance on pay and ensuring continued employment. We see that in Scotland, where we have the lowest unemployment figures on record. It is better that more people are in work in the public sector than that we had changed the public sector pay cap in previous years.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I, too, send my best wishes to the Scottish women's football team for tonight. I also congratulate our tennis players on a wonderful tournament.

It is a pity that the SNP has bounced Labour's proposal on lifting the public sector pay cap in November. Will the Secretary of State tell me what assessment has been made of the effect of the Government's pay cap on the living standards of public sector employees in Scotland? Does he share the view of the Chancellor, who was recently reported to have said that public sector workers are overpaid?

David Mundell: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place and congratulate her on her success in the election. I also send my best wishes to her predecessor, Dave Anderson, who was one of the Members who voluntarily left this Parliament at the last election. Of course, I pass on my best wishes to the Scottish women's football team as I should have done in answer to the question of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). I agree with the Chancellor that we have struck the right balance in public sector pay on the basis that we have ensured that 200,000 public sector jobs were able to be maintained during this period of difficult fiscal conditions.

Lesley Laird: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, but it is very clear that the Government are in complete chaos on this issue, which is very much like the SNP Government, who claim that they will abandon the public sector pay cap—*[Interruption.]*—despite voting it down in a proposal in May. Is it not the case that public sector workers in Scotland are being let down by two weak and wobbly Governments who have the wrong priorities, and that only a Labour Government have the policies and the political will to lift the public sector pay cap, ban austerity, stand up for public sector workers and stand up for Scotland?

David Mundell: Although I might be tempted to agree with the hon. Lady's comments on the SNP Scottish Government, the position with Labour is absolutely clear in that no funds have been identified to increase public sector pay. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has made it very clear that, if we want to make a real difference on public sector pay, we have to do something that hits everybody—put a penny or two on the rates of income tax or VAT or something such as that. We cannot make a big difference just taxing the rich. The Labour party in Scotland and here in Westminster has the soundbites, but it does not have the policies to deliver what it is promising.

Jobcentre Closures

2. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900487]

4. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900489]

6. Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900491]

15. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned closure of job centres in Scotland on local communities. [900500]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We will continue to provide excellent support to those seeking work, or who cannot work, through a network of offices, which are modern, accessible and meet future requirements.

Bambos Charalambous: As yet, no equality impact assessment of the closures has been published. Will the Secretary of State tell this House whether the Government plan to publish such an assessment, and, if so, when?

Damian Hinds: In making these decisions, the Department has fulfilled its duties under the Equality Act 2010 and paid due regard to the impact of the proposals on the staff, and the communities and customers that they serve.

Alex Norris: Given that UK Government cuts to social security and new sanctions on low-paid workers are likely to increase demand for jobcentres, do Ministers agree that it is reckless and perverse of the Government to be closing them down, especially in our most deprived communities that have some of the highest rates of unemployment?

Damian Hinds: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, of course, in looking forward in time to our future needs, we plan for the expected demand on jobcentres and allow for some contingency as well. I also reassure him that the rate of sanctions has been coming down. As we are in Scottish questions, it is particularly relevant to note that the rate of sanctions in Scotland is lower than it is in the rest of the UK.

Faisal Rashid: May I ask the Minister whether he and his colleagues will consider the term in which the excess fares allowance will be paid to Department for Work and Pensions staff across Scotland who are being forced to move office? The Department has refused to use its discretion to pay the EFA for five years, and will cover staff for only three years, which contrasts with previous decisions made by the Department.

Damian Hinds: We do think that we have a fair and reasonable approach to relocation. Of course we are asking some staff to move offices, and we try to do everything we can to facilitate that. Part of that is providing the excess fares policy that the hon. Gentleman mentions, which is greater in its extent than in many other organisations and we do think it is a reasonable approach.

Sandy Martin: The Minister says that there is a low level of sanctions in Scotland, but if a substantial number of jobcentres are closed will it not make journey times longer and routes more complicated, leading to an increase in missed appointments and in sanctions? What mitigating measures will he introduce to deal with an increase in sanctions?

Damian Hinds: The first thing to say is that missing or being late for an appointment does not necessarily result in a sanction. We expect people to make reasonable efforts to make it to appointments and, as I have said, the rate of sanctions has been coming down, but we expect people to have time—the entire working week—available to seek work. That involves going to job interviews and visiting the jobcentre. For an able-bodied person without children, for example, that would be up to 35 hours a week. Obviously, if a person has caring responsibilities, we expect them to have correspondingly less time available.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that reforms to the DWP estate will not lead to a reduction in the number of frontline jobcentre staff?

Damian Hinds: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. In fact in every nation and region of the UK, including Scotland, we are looking to increase the number of frontline staff and work coaches helping people into work.

Mr Speaker: Mr Clark, you were standing a moment ago. Do you wish to give the House the benefit of your thoughts?

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: No? Very well. We will move on.

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is quite clear that the Minister has offered no convincing assurance about the maintenance of access to jobcentre facilities in Glasgow and across Scotland. We have seen a commitment to cut the number of jobcentres in Glasgow by six. These are areas where unemployment is twice the national average and where 35% of people cannot access IT facilities to allow them to apply online for support. There is a clear issue with the provision of a footprint and the citizens advice bureaux have offered a solution through the co-location of services in community hubs alongside citizens advice bureaux, housing associations and council services. Has the Minister given any consideration to those mitigating measures so that we can maintain the footprint or is it, as PCS has said, merely a cost-driven effort to abandon unemployed, sick and disabled people, making it harder for them to access these vital services?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important question. Of course we consider opportunities to co-locate our services with other public sector and third sector services, as he mentions. We continue to consider those opportunities. In the specific case of those jobcentres where we are moving operations more than 3 miles or 20 minutes away, we are considering new outreach facilities. I also want to mention that, of course, in the city of Glasgow the unemployment claimant count has come down by 43% since 2010.

Mr Speaker: I call Deidre Brock.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker—but I was not actually standing at that point.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady was standing. Self-awareness is quite an important quality in the House—

Deidre Brock: I was standing for the previous question—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Lady does not wish to participate in the exchange, that is perfectly all right. It is not compulsory. I call Gerard Killen.

Public Sector Pay Cap

3. Gerard Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the public sector pay cap. [900488]

5. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the public sector pay cap. [900490]

12. Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues on the public sector pay cap. [900497]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I hold regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues on a wide range of matters of importance to Scotland. The Scottish Government are responsible for Scottish Government pay.

Gerard Killen: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and I want to give him another opportunity to clarify his view on the reported comments of the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the weekend. Does he agree that public sector workers are overpaid?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman will have seen what the Chancellor said on Sunday: he said that there are areas in the public service where recruitment and retention are becoming an issue and areas of the country where public sector wages and private sector wages are getting out of kilter in the other direction. It is important that we have a discussion on those issues.

Liz McInnes: Yesterday, in this Chamber, a Treasury Minister declined to answer a question on the grounds that it was way above his pay grade. Should not we be grateful to our public sector workers for not taking that attitude, and is it not high time that they got the pay rise they deserve?

David Mundell: I fully acknowledge the contribution that public sector workers make across the UK, and particularly in Scotland. Of course we will listen carefully when the pay boards make their recommendations.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Sixty-six per cent. of public sector workers in Wales, another devolved country, are women, and I suspect that the figure is a lot higher in Scotland. In the light of that, does the Secretary of State not agree that the public sector pay gap is now fundamentally unsustainable and is not only eroding the living standards of women and families but damaging the economy?

David Mundell: We are all concerned about the gender pay gap. Some figures released within the last hour by a public sector organisation suggest that there are significant gender pay gap issues at the BBC. I set out my position in my previous answer: it is for the Scottish Government to determine pay for Scottish Government employees, and the Government's position has also been set out.

Leaving the EU: Fishing Policy

7. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What discussions he has had with representatives of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation on the Government's policy on fishing after the UK leaves the EU. [900492]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): It is perhaps remiss of me not to welcome new Members from Scotland and elsewhere to this House, in particular when I am answering a question from one of the potential Scottish Fathers of the House.

Since the vote to leave the EU last year, I have spoken regularly with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, which I most recently met in Peterhead on 16 June. In our discussions I emphasised that we will take Scotland out of the failed common fisheries policy and extend control of our waters up to 200 nautical miles or the median line with nearby coastal states.

Mr Carmichael: I hope the Secretary of State will join me in welcoming the news today that the Marine Stewardship Council has again accredited North sea cod as a sustainable species. The cod recovery programme saw some of the best and worst examples of fisheries management. The best were the measures that came from the industry and had credibility with the industry. Will the Government look at the lessons of the cod recovery programme and take the best examples of fishery management to inform future policy?

David Mundell: I, too, absolutely welcome today's announcement on cod. I confirm that we will look to the industry to help shape its future. One thing is clear: this Government will take Scotland and the UK out of the hated common fisheries policy, but the SNP Scottish Government would take us right back in.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will the whole Scottish fishing industry, including processors and catchers, have the opportunity to be represented in consultations on the design of the new fisheries policy?

David Mundell: I very much welcome my hon. Friend to this House as the MP for one of the most important fishing constituencies in the United Kingdom, for which he will be a strong advocate. As he knows, when I visited Peterhead I had the opportunity to meet processors, and I take on board fully their importance in shaping the future of the industry after the CFP.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): News has reached Westminster that the Secretary of State has a new deputy in the House of Lords. Will he therefore instruct his deputy to procure a copy of the "Brexit: devolution" report that the House of Lords published yesterday, which states

"that, in the event that the UK Government does not secure a UK-wide agreement that adequately reflects Scotland's specific needs"—

that includes fishing—

"there is a strong political and economic case for making differentiated arrangements for Scotland"?

David Mundell: I hope you, Mr Speaker, will forgive me for laughing when I hear the SNP extol the House of Lords, which on every other occasion it condemns. The reference—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Docherty-Hughes, despite the fact that your shiny pate is secreted behind the face of Mr Cowan, I can tell what you are up to. You are behaving in your usual outlandish manner, from which I hope you will now desist.

David Mundell: There will in any event be no need for the provision to which the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) refers—this

United Kingdom Government will deliver a good deal on Brexit for Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom.

Jobcentres: Glasgow

8. Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Glasgow City Council on the future of job centres in Glasgow. [900493]

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): DWP officials engage regularly with local authorities, which can of course include exploring opportunities to share accommodation. We are introducing 40 new such arrangements, three in Scotland. These arrangements bring benefits for colleagues, customers and the taxpayer. I am keen that we continue to explore more opportunities into the future.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Given that the hon. Gentleman is going to close quite a number of jobcentres in the city, does he not think he should at least sit down with Glasgow City Council, which is concerned that organisations such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health, the Prince's Trust and others are going to have to pick up the slack of his closure in supporting people into work? He needs to have a discussion about how that will work and what financial support he will give them.

Damian Hinds: We will continue to work with local authorities and third sector organisations, but I must remind the hon. Gentleman that before these changes the city of Glasgow had the greatest coverage of jobcentres per head of population of any large city in the UK. After these changes, it will still have the greatest coverage of jobcentres of any large city in the UK.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): While the hon. Gentleman is having discussions with Glasgow City Council, will he pick up the phone to the City of Edinburgh Council and explain why he can find £1.5 billion for the Democratic Unionist party, but cannot find a solitary pen to sign the Edinburgh city region deal?

Damian Hinds: I am told by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that he may have excitement coming soon.

Agreement with the DUP: Funding for Scotland

9. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Whether the additional funding provided to Northern Ireland announced in the Government's agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party will have consequences on funding for Scotland. [900494]

11. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Whether the additional funding provided to Northern Ireland announced in the Government's agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party will have consequences on funding for Scotland. [900496]

14. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Whether the additional funding provided to Northern Ireland announced in the Government's agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party will have consequences on funding for Scotland. [900499]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):

Like previous Northern Ireland support packages and city deals in Scotland and Wales, this funding is a targeted intervention to address a specific set of unique challenges. As with those previous interventions, this exceptional funding will be made outside the normal, ongoing Barnett funding system. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is excessive noise in the Chamber. To my certain knowledge, at least one retired teacher is in the precincts of the Palace observing our proceedings; she would want there to be a seemly atmosphere.

Alison Thewliss: The running total given by the UK Government to city deals in Scotland since 2014 is already dwarfed by the sums given by local government and the Scottish Government. If £1.5 billion can be found overnight for the DUP deal to hold up this Tory Government, when will the Government find the money for the Tay cities deal, the Ayrshire growth deal and the Perth deal?

David Mundell: I am surprised at the hon. Lady's tone because the Government have committed to delivering city deals across Scotland. There will imminently be some exciting news about Edinburgh. I would have thought she would welcome that, rather than simply politicking.

Hannah Bardell: I would like to put on the record the best wishes of everyone on the Scottish National party Benches to the Scottish football team. I am wearing their colours; I hope they do not mind. I used to play alongside two of Scotland's national players at university—their football careers have obviously been better than mine.

Livingston and West Lothian already have a low proportion of public sector jobs in Scotland; the local authority ranks 20 out of 32. The private sector is strong, but with the loss of HMRC jobs, the percentage of public sector jobs is going to fall. Will the right hon. Gentleman come to my constituency and face up to the reality of those job closures and at least receive a delegation, as is his duty as Secretary of State?

David Mundell: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Martyn Day: May I remind the Secretary of State of his own words? He said that he would not

“agree to anything that could be construed as back-door funding to Northern Ireland.”

We expect him, as Scotland's representative in the Cabinet, to fight for fiscal fairness for Scotland and not to be short-changed by £3 billion. Did he make any representations to the Prime Minister before or after the deal was signed?

David Mundell: I take my responsibility to fight for Scotland's fiscal priorities very seriously. That is why, two years ago when the hon. Gentleman was walking through the Lobby to deliver full fiscal freedom and a £9 billion black hole to Scotland, I voted to keep the Barnett formula.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the benefits to the north-east of Scotland brought about by the UK Government's Aberdeen city region deal? Does he share my concern at the dither and delay of the SNP Government in improving the rail journey times between Aberdeen and the central belt, which may take until the 2020s? We need urgency from the Scottish Government.

David Mundell: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. As a noted councillor in Aberdeen, he played a significant role in bringing together the Aberdeen city region deal, which has been such a boost to the north-east of Scotland. I am disappointed to hear what he says about the actions of the SNP Government, but, sadly, I am not surprised.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State could not be clearer:

“I'm not going to agree to anything that could be construed as back-door funding to Northern Ireland.”

This is not just back door; it is locked away in secure accommodation. Will he therefore detail in full what representations he made to the Prime Minister and what he did at any time to offer any objections on behalf of Scotland?

David Mundell: On 8 June, the people of Scotland delivered their verdict on which party in this House stands up for Scotland and Scotland's financial arrangements. Scottish Conservatives—12 additional MPs. The Scottish National party—21 less.

Mr Speaker: Yes, or even “fewer”.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900571] **Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab):** If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): As we approach recess, I am sure that Members from all parties wish to thank the staff of the House for their dedication to our work here in what has been a particularly challenging year. We saw terrorists attack our democracy and our way of life—not just in the Westminster attack, but in the attacks at Manchester, Finsbury Park and London Bridge. It is thanks to the professionalism and bravery of people such as Elizabeth Bryan, an off-duty A&E nurse from Cambridgeshire who ran to help at the scene of the Borough Market attack and who is with us in the Gallery today—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear”]—that these attacks will never succeed. We are united in defending the values that define our nation.

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

Mr Robinson: Of course the whole House associates itself with the Prime Minister's words about defending our values. Her schedule does not seem so busy, so could she find time to visit Coventry? I can assure her of

a warm welcome from the city's three Labour MPs, who all doubled their majorities in the recent general election that she called; we were very grateful for that.

On a serious note, is the Prime Minister aware that Coventry is the designated national research and development centre for the controls of driverless vehicles? Would she not consider it an appropriate location to relocate her whole Government to? Then she could see the controls of driverless vehicles in practice.

The Prime Minister: Well, I am always happy to visit the west midlands. I am particularly pleased to visit the west midlands under its new Mayor, Andy Street, who is doing a very good job. The hon. Gentleman mentioned automated vehicles. This country is a leader in automated vehicles. That is part of building a strong economy and that is what this Government are doing.

Q4. [900574] Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Our national health service was last week judged the best, safest and most affordable healthcare system—better than that of France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand. Too often in this House, we focus on the negatives. I have heard the Labour party attempt to weaponise the NHS. Will my right hon. Friend—and, I hope, the Leader of the Opposition when he stands—congratulate NHS staff on their skills and dedication, and on the hard work they have put in to achieve these high standards?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to stand here and congratulate all NHS staff, who are delivering such a fantastic service and who have made the NHS, once again—this is not the first time—the No. 1 health system in the world. We are determined to continue to enable that high level of service to be provided, which is why we will be investing more than half a trillion pounds in our NHS between 2015 and 2020.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in thanking all the staff of this House for all the work they do all the year round. They are fantastic, supportive and inclusive, and they are great with the public who come here. I want to thank them for everything they do.

I also join the Prime Minister in thanking all our emergency services for the way they coped with all the terrible emergencies we have had over the past few months in this country, and I thank those communities, such as my own in Finsbury Park, that have come together to oppose those who try to divide us as a community and as a people. The emergency services were in action again yesterday, protecting the people of Coverack from the flood they suffered. We should always remember that we rely on those services.

The Chancellor said this week that some public servants are “overpaid”. Given that the Prime Minister has had to administer a slapdown to her squabbling Cabinet, does she think the Chancellor was actually talking about her own Ministers?

The Prime Minister: First, I join the right hon. Gentleman not only in praising the work of our emergency services, but in recognising the way in which after the terrible terrorist attacks, and of course the appalling tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire, we have seen communities come

together and support those who have been victims of those terrible incidents. I was very pleased, as he knows, to be able to visit Finsbury Park after the attack there and see for myself the work that had been done in that community and the work that he had done that night in working among his constituents to ensure that the community came together after that terrible attack.

On public sector pay, I simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman: I recognise, as I said when I stood on the steps of Downing Street a year ago, that some people in our country are just about managing—they find life a struggle. That covers people who are working in the public sector and some who are working in the private sector, which is why it is important that the Government are taking steps to, for example, help those on the lowest incomes through the national living wage. It is why we have taken millions of people out of paying income tax altogether; and it is why under this Government basic rate taxpayers have seen a tax cut of the equivalent of £1,000. But you only get that with a strong economy, and you only get that with a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the Prime Minister for what she said about my own community; I am obliged to her for that. However, my question was about whether the Chancellor had said that public service workers are overpaid or not. The reality in this country is simply this: a nurse on a median salary starts on £23,000; police officers start on £22,800; and jobcentre clerks start on £15,000. I had a letter from Sarah who wrote to me this week about her sister-in-law, who is a nurse. Sarah said:

“she has sacrificed her health for the caring of others. She has had a pay freeze for the last five years. Only her dedication and passion for her vocation keeps her going. Why is this happening”. What does the Prime Minister say to Sarah and those others working in our NHS?

The Prime Minister: What I say to Sarah and to those working in the national health service is that we recognise the excellent work they are doing. We recognise the sacrifice that they and others have made over the past seven years. That sacrifice has been made because we had to deal with the biggest deficit in our peacetime history—left by a Labour Government. As we look at public sector pay, we balance being fair to public sector workers, protecting jobs and being fair to those who pay for them. The right hon. Gentleman seems to think it is possible to go around promising people more money and promising that nobody is ever going to have to pay for it. He and I both value public sector workers. We both value our public sector services. The difference is that on this side of the House we know that you have to pay for them.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does not seem to have had any problem finding money to pay for the Democratic Unionist party’s support. The Conservatives have been in office for 84 months, and 52 of those months have seen a real fall in wages and income in our country. In the last Prime Minister’s Question Time before the general election, the Prime Minister said:

“every vote for me is a vote for a strong economy with the benefits felt by everyone across the country.”—[*Official Report*, 26 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1104.]

Does she agree you cannot have a strong economy when 6 million people are earning less than the living wage?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman when you cannot have a strong economy: it is when you adopt Labour party policies of half a trillion pounds of extra borrowing, which will mean more spending, more borrowing, higher prices, higher taxes and fewer jobs. The Labour Government crashed the economy; the Conservative Government have come in—more people in work, more people in jobs, more investment.

Jeremy Corbyn: May I invite the Prime Minister to take a check with reality on this? One in eight workers in the United Kingdom—that is 3.8 million people in work—are now living in poverty. Some 55% of people in poverty are in working households. The Prime Minister's lack of touch with reality goes like this. Low pay in Britain is holding people back at a time of rising housing costs, rising food prices and rising transport costs; it threatens people's living standards, and rising consumer debt and falling savings threaten our economic stability. Why does the Prime Minister not understand that low pay is a threat to an already weakening economy?

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty is through work, and what we now see is hundreds—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it is.

Mr Speaker: Order. The question has been asked. The Prime Minister's answer must—and however long it takes, it will—be heard.

The Prime Minister: The best route out of poverty is through work. That is why it is so important that, over the last seven years, we have seen 3 million more jobs created in our economy. It is why we now see so many thousands of people in households with work, rather than in workless households, and hundreds of thousands more children being brought up in a household where there is work rather than a failure to have work. That is what is important. But what is important for Government as well is to ensure that we provide support to people. That is why we created the national living wage. That was the biggest pay increase ever for people on the lowest incomes. When did the Labour party ever introduce the national living wage? Never! That was a Conservative Government and a Conservative record.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was Labour that first introduced the minimum wage—with opposition from the Conservative party.

Wages are lower than they were 10 years ago. The Prime Minister has been in office for just one year, and during that time disposable income has fallen by 2%. The economic consequences of austerity are very clear, and so are the social consequences: life expectancy stalling for the first time in 100 years. Today, the Institute for Fiscal Studies forecasts that income inequality is going to get worse and that child poverty will rise to 5 million by 2022. Does the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are shouting, and shouting excessively. They must calm themselves. Take some sort of soothing medicament.

Jeremy Corbyn: I will try to help hon. Members, Mr Speaker. Does the Prime Minister not realise that her talk of a strong economy does not remotely match the reality that millions of people face, with low wages and poverty at home?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is, of course, wrong in some of the facts that he is putting forward. In fact, inequality is down. Life expectancy is continuing to rise. What we know is that what will not deliver a strong economy for this country is Labour's policies of more borrowing, more spending, higher taxes and fewer jobs. What the right hon. Gentleman wants is a country that is living beyond its means. That means making future generations pay for his mistakes. That is Labour's way, and the Conservatives will never do that.

Jeremy Corbyn: What we want is a country where there are not 4 million children living in poverty and where homelessness does not rise every year. I look along the Front Bench opposite and I see a Cabinet bickering and backbiting while the economy gets weaker and people are pushed further into debt. *[Interruption.]* Well, they can try talking to each other. The economy is—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) is gesticulating in a distinctly eccentric manner and he must stop doing so. Shakespeare's county deserves better.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that wages are falling, the economy is slowing, the construction sector is in recession, the trade deficit is widening, and we face crucial Brexit negotiations. Is not the truth that this divided Government are unable to give this country the leadership it so desperately needs now to deal with these issues?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman the reality. The reality is that he is always talking Britain down and we are leading Britain forward. Let us look at the record of the Conservatives in government: 3 million more jobs, 4 million people out of paying income tax altogether, over 30 million with a cut in their income tax, record levels of people in employment, record numbers of women in work, the deficit cut by three quarters, inequality down, and record levels of foreign direct investment. That is a record to be proud of, and you only get it with a Conservative Government. *[HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]*

Mr Speaker: I call Mike Wood. I do not think the hon. Gentleman knew how popular he was.

Q5. [900575] **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): The black country flag has come under attack from Labour Members in recent days. Will the Prime Minister join me in again congratulating Gracie Sheppard, who designed the flag, reflecting our industrial heritage, when she was just 12 years old? Does the Prime Minister agree that the latest figures showing the west midlands as the fastest-growing part of this country show once again that the black country remains a great place to do business?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend says—he is absolutely right—the black country remains a great place to do business. I would like to congratulate Gracie on designing that flag at the age of only 12. I am sure that she and others, including the *Express & Star*, have been surprised at the attitude from the Labour Benches

on this particular issue. I commend my hon. Friend and my other hon. Friends in the black country, and indeed the *Express & Star*, for the work that they are doing to promote the black country as that great place to do business, to live, and to bring up children like Gracie.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister believe that her Government have delivered pension fairness for women who, like her, were born in the 1950s?

The Prime Minister: What the Government are delivering for women is a better state pension for women so that women in future will be better off under the state pension than they have been in the past. We are equalising the state pension age, and I think that everybody across the whole House will recognise that that is the right thing to do.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister has found up to £35 billion for Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, up to £200 billion to replace the Trident missile system, and £1 billion for a deal with the DUP just so she can keep her own job. She seems to be able to shake the magic money tree when she wants to. Will she now end the injustice for those women who are missing out on their pensions before she herself thinks about retiring?

The Prime Minister: I am a little surprised, given the hon. Gentleman's background, that he said what he did about Hinkley Point. Hinkley Point is actually privately funded—this is not money that is coming from the Government to develop Hinkley Point—so I find that a little strange. We have put £1 billion extra into the question of the change in the state pension age to ensure that nobody sees their state pension age increase by more than 18 months from that which was previously expected. I must also say to the hon. Gentleman that the Scottish Government of course now have extra powers in the area of welfare. Perhaps it is about time that the Scottish Government got on with the day job and stopped talking endlessly about independence.

Q8. [900578] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Businesses in Stafford and other constituencies need as much certainty as possible now about what will happen after we leave the EU in March 2019 for investment decisions they are making in the coming weeks and months. As the Government work on the comprehensive future relationship with our European neighbours, will they also negotiate time-bound transitional arrangements that prioritise the jobs of our constituents and the health of our economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have said in this Chamber and elsewhere, we want to avoid a cliff edge for businesses, because people want to know where they stand, and to be able to carry on investing in the UK and creating the jobs that we have seen being created. As I have also said before, once we know—once we have negotiated through this two-year period—what the end-state relationship for the UK and the European Union will be in the future, it will then be necessary to have an implementation period when people can adjust to that new end state that is coming in. There will be some very practical things that need to be done during that period. As part of the negotiations, it will

be important for us to agree what that implementation period, or periods, is, and what the arrangements will be during that.

Q2. [900572] Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Since Winnie Ewing's maiden speech 50 years ago this year, SNP MPs and MSPs have been arguing for the voting age to be lowered. In recent elections, young people have proven themselves to be the most knowledgeable and most engaged that they have ever been. I believe there is a majority in this House in favour of lowering the voting age. Will the Prime Minister support giving votes to 16 and 17-year-olds?

The Prime Minister: I would say to the hon. Lady that this is one of those issues on which people will obviously have different views. My view has always been and continues to be that 18 is the right age. We expect people to continue in education or training until the age of 18, and I think that is the right point for the voting age.

Q9. [900579] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In Harrow and up and down the country, young people will be eagerly anticipating their A-level results to see whether they qualify for a university education. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the dramatic increase in the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university, and can she think of anyone who should apologise for misleading the British public?

The Prime Minister: I think it is very important, as people are thinking about going to university, that they are not misled in any way. It is the case that more disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now applying to university than ever before. I believe the Leader of the Opposition said exactly the opposite, and I think he should apologise for that. I think the Labour party should actually go further. At the election, the Leader of the Opposition vowed to deal with student debt, and Labour were going to abolish student debt; now they say it was not a promise at all. Students know Labour cannot be trusted on student fees.

Q3. [900573] Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will now know what it is like to have a job but to lack job security. Sometimes it can even bring a tear to the eye. Given her new-found empathy for millions of workers in insecure work, why is she now cutting six Department for Work and Pensions jobcentres in Glasgow and also back-office staff at Springburn in my constituency, where unemployment is twice the national average?

The Prime Minister: May I start by welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his new job in this House? What is happening in relation to jobcentres in Scotland is that the DWP is ensuring it is using the estate properly and to the best advantage. As a result of what is happening, no services are going to be cut. In fact, services to people using jobcentres will be enhanced in future. I think what matters is actually the service that is provided to people attending those jobcentres.

Q11. [900581] Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The brave men and women of our armed forces put themselves in extremely challenging situations in their efforts to keep us all safe. We therefore owe it to them to do all we can to support them and their families when they have

completed their service. I warmly welcome the launch of the “Defence people mental health and wellbeing strategy” yesterday, but will my right hon. Friend tell the House how we can co-ordinate this excellent programme with our international allies? May I also wish her a very well deserved break when she finally decides to take it in the recess?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. Members across the House recognise the importance of ensuring that we provide that support to those who are in our services and our veterans. The issue of mental health and wellbeing is very important, and I welcome the new strategy for mental health and wellbeing in the armed forces. I also pay tribute to the tireless work of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), particularly on mental health, since he came to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) raises an issue that is important not just for us in the UK; we need to see how we can work internationally on it. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence launched the strategy at an international conference yesterday, with counterparts from the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. We will all campaign against the stigmas around mental health so that members of our armed forces and our veterans can get the help they need.

Q6. [900576] Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): In my constituency of Liverpool, Walton, almost 40% of children are growing up in poverty. With schools closing this week and local support services cut to the bone, austerity bites and kids do not get fed. The Prime Minister says that her mission is to make Britain “a country that works for everyone”.

What is she doing now to stop kids going hungry this summer in Liverpool, Walton?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place in this House? He is right to say that it is important that we look at the provision made in school for children and at the issue of households and poverty, but as I said to his right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the best way we can deal with poverty—the best route out of poverty—is for people to get into the workplace and then for us to ensure that other, better-paid jobs are provided for people in the workplace in the future.

Q12. [900582] Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): A young woman in Telford who gave evidence in a horrific child sexual exploitation case five years ago is living in fear. The perpetrator, who received a 22-year sentence, is about to be released early. CSE victims are too often overlooked and ignored. Does the Prime Minister agree that CSE victims should be properly consulted on the release of perpetrators and that in this case the perpetrator should not be returned to Telford?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. We all know that child sexual exploitation is an absolutely horrific crime. It is absolutely right that if victims are going to come forward to report this abuse, they need to know that they will be supported so that they can have the confidence to do so and be

confident in their future security and safety. The victim contact scheme is supposed to treat victims properly and ensure that consideration is given to victim-related conditions when looking at an offender’s licence on release. If my hon. Friend would like to write with the details of the case to my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary, he will look at it very carefully.

Q7. [900577] Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The interim Prime Minister has repeatedly refused to answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, so may I try again? It was reported over the weekend, by the temporary Chancellor’s own Cabinet colleagues, that he had said that some public sector workers are “overpaid”. Will the Prime Minister tell the House, the country and those public sector workers which ones she thinks are overpaid, which ones she thinks are underpaid and what she is going to do about it?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I recognise that there will be people working in the public sector who do find life a struggle and are just about managing, and there will be people in the private sector who are in the same place. I also say to the hon. Gentleman that, as we have seen in the figures released today, there are some people working in the public sector who are very well paid. We need to ensure that, when we look at public sector pay, we balance being fair to workers, protecting jobs and being fair to those who pay for the public sector, and that we also support people by ensuring that they can keep more of the money they earn. That is why we believe in cutting taxes.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Government are under predictable pressure on public sector pay and public sector spending, which we would all like to respond to if there were some sensible demands. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way in which a responsible Government can increase public sector pay is if we restore to this country strong economic growth and a sensible Government fiscal balance sheet, and that the biggest threats to our achieving either of those things over the next two years are a bad Brexit deal that puts up barriers to trade and investment, or the return of a hard-left, old-fashioned socialist Government?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. As a very successful former Chancellor of the Exchequer, he speaks with expertise on this issue. He is right that we need to get a good Brexit deal, but he is also right that the policies of the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, were they ever to get the opportunity to put them into practice, would not lead to more money for nurses, our national health service or our public sector; they would lead, through higher spending and higher borrowing, to jobs going, higher prices, higher taxes for people, less money available for our health service and less money available for our nurses.

Q10. [900580] Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister know that her universal credit process is failing my constituents? The Salvation Army and Streetlife report that vulnerable Blackpool people are juggling a month’s money without help, that there

are unfair sanctions for people with mental health issues, that a six-week wait for money is causing more stress, and that there is a phone helpline that Citizens Advice says can cost claimants 55p a minute and take 39 minutes to answer. Can she start by getting them a freephone number?

The Prime Minister: The importance of the universal credit scheme is that it is ensuring that being in work always pays. With the universal credit scheme, we are seeing more people getting into the workplace. The DWP is constantly looking at the scheme and how it is operating around the country to ensure that any problems that people raise are addressed.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Thousands of my constituents and millions of consumers in this country have to pay surcharges when they use their credit or debit card—a highly unfair practice. Will my right hon. Friend outline the impact of lifting surcharges on consumers in this country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is very important that this issue is being addressed. We believe that rip-off charges have no place in modern Britain. That is why card charging abuse is going to come to an end. This is about fairness and transparency. We do not want people to be surprised, when they come to pay for something, that an extra surcharge is suddenly added because they have used a particular card. The total value of such fees in 2010 was estimated to be £473 million. That money will be put back in the hands of shoppers across the country, so that they have more cash to spend on the things that matter to them.

Q13. [900583] Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): In her Lancaster House speech, the Prime Minister said that the UK would be leaving the single market. Will she tell the House whether that red line on the single market also applies to any transitional agreement or implementation period that might be agreed for the period after March 2019?

The Prime Minister: We said that we would no longer be a member of the single market because we will no longer be a member of the European Union and, as the European Union says consistently, its four pillars are indivisible. Therefore, the fact that we do not wish to be subject to other issues, like the European Court of Justice and free movement requirements, means that we will no longer be a member of the single market. At the end of the two years, when we have negotiated the end state deal, there will be an implementation period for that deal, but we are very clear that at the point at which we reach the end of the negotiations, we will be out of the European Union.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the Institute for Fiscal Studies report this week on income inequality in the UK. It clearly shows that, contrary to Labour propaganda that was often repeated during the general election, the income gap between rich and poor in our country has reduced every year since 2010. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that clearly shows that those with the broadest shoulders are bearing the heaviest burden in dealing with the debt we inherited from the last Labour Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The IFS report clearly shows what he has said today. As we know, the top 1% of taxpayers are bearing 27% of the tax burden. That is a higher burden than in any year under the Labour Government.

Q14. [900584] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): NHS England commissions child and adolescent mental health beds at a private hospital in my constituency, which recently received a damning Care Quality Commission report. The CQC found that the hospital was unsafe not least because, on inspection, it found a young woman with MRSA with open wounds on a ward. Does the Prime Minister share my concern that a shortage of mental health beds risks the NHS placing vulnerable young people in unsafe environments, and will she consider giving NHS England the responsibility for, and the resources to investigate, the quality of care before it commissions?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very significant point. On mental health, of course we are boosting the funding that is going into mental health in the national health service and across the picture, across Government, in terms of dealing with mental health. We are taking a number of steps to improve mental health. She has raised a very particular case, which I am sure everyone in the House will have been concerned to hear, and I will ensure that the Secretary of State looks into the case she has raised.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Daesh's atrocities have failed to deliver a caliph or a fictional caliphate. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our international partners must provide resources and commitment to apply international law and bring prosecutions against Daesh fighters and those who choose to partner with them, making it clear that wherever a death-cult terrorist hides, we will find them and hold them accountable for their barbaric crimes?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this. It is important that those who have committed these horrific crimes are brought to justice. We have done good work as a United Kingdom in helping those in these theatres to see how they can collect evidence that can then be used in prosecutions. We want to do this work internationally through the United Nations and it is an issue that I spoke about to Prime Minister al-Abadi of Iraq yesterday. We want to work with them and others to ensure that we can send the very clear message that my hon. Friend identifies.

Q15. [900585] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the huge increase in knife crime has tragic consequences for families in constituencies such as mine? What will she do to work with me and other Members on both sides of the House to find solutions to this blight on young lives, including looking again at the budget for policing?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place in the House. Her presence has enabled me to appoint a very good chief of staff to my office at No. 10. She raises the very serious issue of knife crime. The Government have been taking a tougher stance on knife crime. We do think this is an issue and we have done this in a variety of ways. Now, if people carry a knife in public they are much more likely to go to

prison. But we do recognise that there is more to do in this area. That is why yesterday my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced plans to consult on new offences to toughen up knife crime laws, including restricting the online sale of knives—we have done some of that already, but we think there is more for us to do—and banning possession of dangerous or offensive weapons on private property. The hon. Lady has raised an important issue and the Government have been addressing it. We recognise that we need to do more, and that is what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is doing.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Before the election, the Government committed to removing the faith-based cap for free schools and even included that promise in our election manifesto. Catholic dioceses up and down the country are anxious to open free schools and some have even purchased sites. Will the Prime Minister commit her Government to honouring that solemn pledge in our manifesto?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will recognise that the reason we put that in our manifesto, and the reason it was in the schools Green Paper that we published before the election, is that we do believe it is important to enable more faith schools to be set up and more faith schools to expand. This is an issue that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is considering and she will publish further details on our overall view in terms of improving school diversity and encouraging the creation of more good school places in the near future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Last week the Prime Minister refused to make public a report on the foreign funding of extremists in the United Kingdom, despite pressure from Members in all parts of the House and beyond. Last night, survivors of 9/11 also urged her to make the report available. Has she refused to do so simply because the content of the report will embarrass the Government's friends in Saudi Arabia, or because Ministers care rather more about arms sales to Riyadh than they do about public safety in Britain?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely nothing to do with that. There is certain confidential information in the report that means that it would not be appropriate to publish it, but my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made it available, on a Privy Council basis, to Opposition parties.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): For signs of the strong economy that the Prime Minister has so eloquently outlined this morning, we need look no further than Taunton Deane. It is a microcosm of the national picture, with record house building, record employment, and record Government investment in road schemes such as the A358 upgrade and the expansion of junction 25. Does the Prime Minister agree that to build on the economic success that this Government have overseen, those key road projects should not just speed up traffic and ease congestion but unlock more jobs, thus further fuelling the rise in productivity?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to recognise Taunton Deane as a microcosm of the excellent economy that we see across the country. My hon. Friend has

made an important point about the need to invest in infrastructure in order to boost our economy. It is a point that the Government readily understand and accept, which is why, in last year's autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was able to announce a £23 billion national productivity investment fund, a considerable portion of which will go into infrastructure. We fully recognise not just the importance of large-scale transport projects such as Crossrail, HS2 and the expansion of Heathrow, but the importance of investing in projects at a more local level if we are to unlock further economic growth in areas like Taunton Deane.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): With no legal powers, funds or criteria, and with schools and Parliament not open, Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust is once again consulting on the closure of the hospital and the building of a new £400 million hospital in Belmont. There have been five consultations over 18 years, wasting £40 million of taxpayers' money. Is it not time for the Prime Minister to step in and put a stop to it, and allow this important hospital to get on with the day job?

The Prime Minister: I understand that Epsom and St Helier Trust is indeed seeking views on future specialist care at the trust, and on how the existing buildings can be improved. I also understand that the discussions are at an early stage, that no final decisions have been made, and that any proposals for major service change will be subject to a full public consultation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Not only has the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that we have the narrowest income gaps for a decade, but the Office for National Statistics has said that Britain has some of the lowest levels of persistent poverty in Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right that this country is governed by the true facts and not by fake news, and that this Government are committed to building a strong economy for all?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by welcoming my hon. Friend to the Chamber. She is absolutely right: we owe it to our constituents—we owe it to the public—to ensure that when we debate these issues we debate them on the basis of the facts, and not on the basis of the sort of fake news that we hear all too often in the Chamber.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Lakeside children's centre is a lifeline for often struggling kids and their parents in one of the poorest wards in Britain, giving them the best possible start in life, yet it is one of 26 children's centres that face closure in Birmingham. Does the Prime Minister understand the consequences of her actions? Does she understand that £700 million of cuts in the city council's budget are having a devastating impact on the provision of children's centres? Will she act properly to fund those centres, and to reverse a tidal wave of closures that will otherwise have a devastating impact on the life chances of a whole generation of children?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, decisions on this issue are being taken by the Birmingham local authority, but it ill behoves any Member of the Labour party to

stand up in this House and complain about the issues with public spending that we have had to address, because they are the direct result of the failure of a Labour Government to manage our economy.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is signalling that she wishes to raise a point of order, but customarily points of order come after urgent questions and statements. If the hon. Lady can hold herself until that point, we look forward with eager anticipation to hearing of what she wishes to unburden herself then.

Prison and Youth Custody Centre Safety

12.46 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on safety in prisons and the findings of Her Majesty's chief inspector's annual report.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Independent scrutiny is an essential part of our prison system, and I thank the chief inspector of prisons and his team for the work they do in delivering this, including through his annual report. His report raises important issues in relation to safety and security in prisons and youth custody. We have been clear that a calm and ordered environment needs to be created to ensure effective rehabilitation, and that achieving this is our priority.

The current levels of violence, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths in the adult estate are unacceptable. The issues in our prisons have deep roots and, while they will not be addressed overnight, we are combining immediate action to stabilise the estate with significant additional investment. For example, we are investing £100 million a year to bring in an additional 2,500 prison officers by the end of 2018. We are already making significant progress, with a net increase of 515 prison officers in post at the end of March compared with the previous quarter.

Turning to youth justice, the annual report highlights particular issues regarding the youth estate. I reassure the hon. Lady that the safety and welfare of every young person in custody is of paramount importance to me and we are clear that more needs to be done to achieve this.

In response to Charlie Taylor's review of the youth justice system last December, the Government acknowledged the serious issues the youth justice system faces, and that is why we are reforming the system. Let me give three examples of the progress we are making. First, we have created a new youth custody service, with an executive director, for the first time in the Department's history. Secondly, the development of a new youth justice specialist officer role is ensuring that more staff can be specifically trained to work with young people, boosting the numbers on the operational frontline in youth offender institutions by 20%, and recruiting workers specifically trained to work within the youth sector. Thirdly, there is the introduction of a more individualised approach for young people focused on education and health, enhancing the workforce, improving governance, and developing the secure estate.

Finally, in his report the chief inspector expressed disappointment about the implementation rate of his recommendations. I recognise this concern, and to address this, we have created a new unit within Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to help ensure that recommendations are taken forward in a timely manner and to track how they are being implemented by prisons.

The issues within our prisons will not be resolved overnight, but we are determined to make progress as quickly as possible, and I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will support our plans for reform.

Seema Malhotra: Last year, the chief inspector reported that too many of our prisons had become unacceptably violent and dangerous. This year, he reports that the situation has not improved, and that it has got worse. Staff assaults increased by 38% in the 12 months to December 2016. Of the 29 local prisons and training institutes inspected last year, 21 were judged to be poor, or not sufficiently good, in the area of safety.

Only two weeks ago, here in the Chamber, I raised the issues at Feltham young offenders institution, but this devastating report is a cause for even greater concern. The jump in violence in our prisons is a crisis of the Government's own making. The warning signs have been there. The Government have been warned by MPs, by the staff in our prisons and by charities. Now they are being condemned by this damning report. The budget for prisons has been cut by more than a fifth over the past six years, and those cuts have now been proved to be a false economy. Prison staff numbers have been cut by a quarter and those who remain are being put at risk. The human impact of Tory austerity is now being laid bare in our prison system. Effective prisons should be about rehabilitation, so that people come out less likely to reoffend. Drugs, debt and bullying are contributing to the violence, but this has been found to be compounded by staffing levels described as being simply too low to keep order and run a decent regime.

In the last Parliament, the Government introduced a Bill to address some of these safety concerns. However, the Bill was lost on Dissolution. Despite recognition of prison safety being in the Tory manifesto, no prisons legislation was announced in the 2017 Queen's Speech. Will the Minister tell the House whether there is any intention of bringing back that legislation? Will he also tell us why a third of prisons have been found not to have implemented the prisons and probation ombudsman's recommendations on reducing the risk of self-inflicted death? What action is being taken to address governance concerns and the extensive use of force and segregation? Will the Minister also update the House on the implementation of progress on recruitment and the action being taken to keep experienced staff and retain new staff? Our prison system is no longer fit for purpose and the Government must take urgent action.

Dr Lee: We fully recognise that there are difficulties in the prison system—we have been honest about that ever since I have been in the Department—and yes, the staffing issue has been indicated as a problem. It has been addressed in the last year and, as I have said, we have appointed more than 500 to March and we are on course to fulfil our target of 2,500 extra prison officers by the end of 2018. I would argue, however, that the unforeseen exacerbant in prisons has been the use of Spice and other drugs. This was not anticipated by any previous Government and it is undeniably causing difficulties in terms of the behaviour of prisoners and the corruption of prisoners and some staff with regard to the trade in those substances.

I also take seriously the issue of mental health in prisons. Only yesterday I had further meetings with the Department of Health, which carries responsibility for that. We recognise that we need to improve mental health services for offenders, including the services relating to substance misuse, both in custody and in the community.

[*Dr Phillip Lee*]

We are working hard to make those improvements because we know that those issues are contributing to the problems that the hon. Lady has raised.

In relation to the youth estate, and particularly to Feltham, which is in the hon. Lady's constituency, the use of segregation is an issue. It has been an issue recently in the case that has been raised, but I cannot comment on that case because there is an appeal. This indicates how difficult it can be to manage young people. Over the past 10 years, the number of young people being held in custody has fallen from 3,000 to 1,000. That is something to celebrate. What we cannot celebrate, however, is the fact that when that target was set, before 2010, no plan was in place to change the infrastructure to meet the demands of dealing with and managing 1,000 extremely difficult young people at any one time. We are seeing problems not just at Feltham but across the youth justice system. I am fully aware of those problems, and that is why we are bringing forward two new secure schools over the next two years.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister is right to be frank, as he always has been, about the dire state of affairs in our prisons, which the Select Committee highlighted in a number of reports during the last Parliament. On a constructive note, does he recognise that although the Queen's Speech contained no prisons legislation for the current Session, it would none the less be appropriate for the Government to take forward much of the prison reform agenda that does not require legislation? In particular, will he commit to ensuring that data and updates are provided to the House—through the Select Committee or otherwise—on the progress of the implementation of Her Majesty's inspectorate's recommendations? We do not need legislation for the Government to be transparent about that, and we need to track the progress that is being made.

Dr Lee: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his reappointment as Chair of the Justice Committee. We are committed to transparency on this. We recognise that there is a series of challenges and problems within the system, and I would be more than happy to come before his Committee to discuss this further. In regard to legislation, we have not ruled out future legislation on prisons, but I would argue that there is quite a lot we can be getting on with that does not require legislation. We are eager, keen and determined to reform our prison system.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Yesterday's scathing report by the chief inspector of prisons in England and Wales represents a watershed moment in the national debate on our prisons. Prisons should be places not only of punishment but of rehabilitation. They should be making us all safer in the short run and in the longer term. I believe that the whole House will be alarmed by the chief inspector's view that

"too many of our prisons had become unacceptably violent and dangerous places."

Members on both sides of the House are all too well aware that there is a crisis in our prisons, and yesterday's report revealed that, despite the Government's warm words, the situation is not under control, and it is getting worse.

In the light of that, I believe that the Minister has some serious questions to answer. Does he agree with the remarks by his former colleague, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and former next Prime Minister, that prisons are approaching an "emergency"? What role does he think the substantial cuts to the prisons budget since 2010 have played in this, and what measures will he undertake to address the situation? The chief inspector of prisons in England and Wales has warned that this crisis

"has all been compounded by staffing levels in many jails that are simply too low".

Does the Minister agree that prison officers deserve a pay rise, and that that will be necessary if we are going to increase numbers and improve retention?

The chief inspector has also said that he is "appalled by the conditions in which we hold many prisoners". What measures is the Minister taking to address this and to reform our prisons so that prisoners leave prison as less, rather than more, of a danger to society? Most shockingly, the number of self-inflicted deaths has more than doubled since 2013. What strategy will he adopt, and what specific resources will he allocate, to reduce that number? The chief inspector said that he had "reached the conclusion that there was not a single establishment that we inspected in England and Wales in which it was safe to hold children and young people."

He added that the speed of decline had been staggering, given that in 2013-14, nine out of 12 institutions were graded as good or reasonably good for safety. What explanation does this Minister have for this? Everyone knows that the Government have created a crisis in our prisons. What yesterday's report shows is that they are failing to take action to solve it.

Dr Lee: I do not accept that the Department has lost control of the prison system. That is nonsense. We have a full grip on the issues that we need to face. I would like to talk about the £1.3 billion that we have invested to transform the estate. By transforming it, we are going to improve the quality of the accommodation for prisoners, which will have a direct impact on the problems that we are encountering among the small volume of people who have mental health and suicide issues. We recognise that parts of our estate are antiquated, and that is why we are investing the money.

As I have already said, we know that there are many difficulties in the youth justice system, where the violence rate is 10 times higher than in the adult prison estate. I give my full support to the staff who continue to work in the youth estate because I have seen it with my own eyes: I have visited the majority of the youth estate and it is extremely difficult. I would argue that the genesis of the problem goes back many years. As I alluded to earlier, the admirable intention to reduce the number of people being locked up in the youth estate has brought us to a point at which we have a very challenging population that is particularly violent and difficult to manage. That is why we have the problems we have.

We are bringing forward plans on secure schools—there are two in the pipeline—and we intend to make them a completely different regime with a completely different curriculum balance, including getting people outside more because I am particularly passionate about the use of sport, so that we can deal with the issues we are

confronting. I am under no illusions about how difficult this issue is, but we have a plan and we are going to implement it.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I know the Minister appreciates the fact that people with autism are disproportionately represented in the custodial system. Notwithstanding the issues at YOI Feltham, it was in fact the first prison to receive autism-friendly accreditation, and the governor and staff there report that that contributed to a diminishment in violence levels across the whole estate. Some 20 prisons have indicated interest in such accreditation. Will the Minister look into the programme and consider making its roll-out compulsory throughout the entire prison estate? It would be of benefit to prisoners and prison staff alike.

Dr Lee: Yes, I am more than happy to consider rolling out that programme. There are positive schemes, and not only with regard to the diagnosis, treatment and management of autism; various sports clubs, rugby clubs and football clubs are also involved, such as Saracens at Feltham. The work they are doing and the evidence of its outcomes are all positive. That is why I am passionate about this: if we can get the management of autism and mental health right and broaden the curriculum so that more time is spent outside cells, I am convinced that we can change the behaviour and atmosphere in each prison and institution so that staff can feel safe while they are at work.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The combination of rising prisoner numbers and shrinking budgets is a major factor that affects the welfare of prison officers and prisoners. In that context, it is regrettable that the UK Government dropped prison reform from the Queen's Speech and continue to cut budgets and staff numbers. In contrast, the Scottish National party Government in Scotland have continued to invest in modernising and improving the prison estate. They have also committed to significant penal reform, aimed at reducing reoffending by moving away from custodial sentences in favour of community sentences, which have been proven to be better for rehabilitation. Does the Minister agree that he should follow the Scottish Government's example and concentrate his efforts on schemes that will reduce prison numbers and overcrowding, thereby reducing pressure on prison officers and prisoners?

Dr Lee: Yes, intellectually I agree with the hon. and learned Lady that it would make life a lot easier if we could reduce the prison population, and I know that the Secretary of State agrees with that position. The difficulty is the constant balance with the justice issue: if people have committed crimes, they have to serve the time. The question is where they serve that time. I am responsible for women's justice, on which a strategy is coming out by the end of the year. I very much want that strategy to concentrate on the provision of community sentences and for us to move to that model of prison—in future years it could be rolled out to the adult male estate, but I am just looking at the female estate. I think that we can learn a lot from where we hold people when they are serving their time. I am going to Scotland in the autumn and am looking forward to seeing a few programmes up there, because I gather that some good work is being done.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is the Minister satisfied that sufficient remedies are available to deal with violent offenders?

Dr Lee: Yes, I am.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister is right to say that legislation will not solve this crisis by itself—many other measures are necessary—but will he tell the House why the Prisons and Courts Bill, which was drafted and had made some progress in the previous Parliament, has been dropped? If the Government are committed to prison reform, why have they dropped a piece of legislation that was ready to be considered by the House?

Dr Lee: We can deliver our reform package without any further legislation. We will not rule out further legislation if there is a requirement for it in future, but the right hon. Gentleman will recognise that there are pressures on parliamentary time and this is something we are having to accommodate. Nevertheless, there is absolutely no reason why we cannot continue with the reform programme we have planned.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does the Minister agree that although there are challenges, dedicated officers are doing much positive and transformative work in prisons on issues such as mental health, as well as through chaplaincy services and restorative justice programmes? An example is the work I have seen being done at Thorn Cross Prison over many years by Shawn Verhey and Lorraine Turner. Will he join me in thanking them, and the many dedicated officers like them who do such a tremendous job?

Dr Lee: Yes. That is another example of how, throughout the system, positive schemes are being followed. People who work in a variety of areas, particularly mental health, are delivering care to the prisoners who need it, so that they can rehabilitate properly before they return to society.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Minister referred to the advent of drugs such as Spice as an unknown quantity for the Prison Service to have to deal with, but the fact that there are a quarter fewer prison officers than in 2010 hardly helps to address new challenges. Assaults on staff are up by 70% since 2009, and in 2016 alone one in five justice staff members left the sector. Will the Minister confirm that there is a retention crisis, which is being fuelled by the disgraceful rise in the number of assaults on Prison Service staff?

Dr Lee: As I hope the right hon. Lady would acknowledge, I am trying to be as candid as possible about the difficulties we face. A year ago, we acknowledged that there was a need for more staff, and we are delivering on that. I must stress, though, that there was no expectation that the drug would cause this problem. There is yet to be proper documentation on how it affects the prisoners who take it and their behaviour, and on the long-term impact that that will have on the prison population. We acknowledge that we need more staff, and that those staff need better training. In the youth justice system, we are introducing a new youth custody role, because we recognise that additional skills are needed. We recognise the problems, and we are working to solve them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will share my concern about the impact of contraband, and particularly new psychoactive substances, on prisoners and the violence that it can cause, so will he say what measures the Department is taking to prevent such materials from getting into prisons?

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We have improved the seizure of drugs; the figure for the past 12 months is about 225 kg, which is up on the previous year. We have employed dogs to detect psychoactive substances, and we were the first jurisdiction in the world to introduce drug testing for psychoactive substances. We continue to develop that service as the substances evolve.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I hope that the planned new youth custody service works, but will the Minister say how many new prison officers will join the existing service this year?

Dr Lee: No, I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an exact figure, but I will write to him with it. We are actively seeking to recruit in every single institution area, particularly in south-east England, where there are always challenges in recruiting prison staff. Perhaps more importantly, we are trying to recruit people who have a history of working with young people. Working with troubled young individuals is a difficult business, and we recognise that there may have been recruitment errors in the past. We want to recruit people who have the proper experience.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The Minister will know that I have previously questioned his Department about rehabilitation. As a result of the report, will he prioritise rehabilitation plans for offenders and employment opportunities for ex-offenders?

Dr Lee: Yes, that is very much our intention. There are several schemes throughout the country that involve employers. I visited Drake Hall, a women's prison, where Halfords has a bicycle repair unit, and met an offender who was leaving prison a week or so later to work for Halfords. Such schemes up and down the country are fantastic and we need more of them. We are working hard on getting more.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): This is surely an issue of safeguarding. The chief inspector of prisons says that there is not a single establishment that is currently safe to hold children and young people. The Minister did not answer the specific question put to him by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgen) about why there has been such a staggering decline in safety over the past year and, as the chief inspector said, such a "slump in standards". Can the Minister explain what a "slump in standards" means, and what he is doing to address it?

Dr Lee: I do not accept that all institutions fit that description. YOI Werrington received a positive report last week. I would argue that the slump has not happened over the past year. As I keep saying, the problem came about over a number of years. With some institutions, we are wrestling with a legacy of issues. At one institution, for example, a contract that was signed in 2004 is

preventing us from making necessary changes. The idea that this problem was created by this Government is simplistic and just not accurate.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): This Government are building new prison capacity, including at Wellingborough in north Northamptonshire. What difference does my hon. Friend believe that that will make in terms of improving safety?

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I said earlier, some of our prisons are Victorian. They are antiquated, and the quality of the cells is substandard, which is why we are building new prisons. Cells in which prisoners find it much harder to commit suicide are what is needed, which is why I am pleased that we are investing £1.3 billion in the system.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Let me declare an interest as an outgoing police and crime commissioner. This report is devastating and the Minister must act on it. One way of acting very quickly would be to invest in things such as non-custodial programmes for women offenders and intensive community orders, which have better returns in terms of reoffending rates. Will the Minister commit this Government to putting money where it will make a real difference?

Dr Lee: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and I welcome him back to the House. It is good to see him here, having had a good relationship with him before. Yes, the women's justice system is a classic example of where there is scope to devolve responsibility and indeed funds. North-west England, a part of which he used to represent, has had a whole-system approach to funding over the past year or two, so that we can try to build a system in which women can be treated holistically and in which the team understands each woman's home, situation, partners and relationships, so that it can bear down on the number of people who are locked up. In the strategy that will be delivered before the end of the year, I hope to outline in more detail what I want to do in north-west England.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Last November, the Department outlined in its White Paper probably the most comprehensive plan for improving our prisons for a generation. Some items—a minority of them—require primary legislation. I would like to see that brought forward in due course, particularly with regard to changing the statutory definition of the purpose of a prison to include rehabilitation and reform. However, the vast majority of items do not require such legislation, so will the Minister confirm that his Department will continue to implement the White Paper in full?

Dr Lee: My hon. Friend is very informed on this matter. Yes, he is right: the great majority of the reform package that was announced last year can be delivered without any further legislation. As I have said three times, we have not ruled out primary legislation in this area in the near future.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): By what date does the Minister expect the first people to enter the new units that he has announced for the north and the south? Will he update the Justice Committee on the objectives that

he has set for improving the situation, and will he agree to look again at the recommendations of Lord Toby Harris, to which the Government did not agree when they were produced early last year?

Dr Lee: I think the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the secure schools. We are committed to opening one in September 2019. There is a possibility that it could be earlier, but it depends on finding the appropriate site; as Members can imagine, these sites have to be secure. We are working extremely hard and are in negotiations with various agencies. The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime is particularly interested in assisting us on this. When we know about the locations, we can be a bit clearer about the delivery date.

On the wider question, which I think is about the state of the youth justice system, he can probably tell that I think we need to move towards a different system of how we lock up young people. Sadly, we recognise that some young people will need to be locked up—we have a very small uptick in some serious sexual crimes at the moment—but the environment, the staffing and the manner in which we do so must change. This report confirms what we already knew, and my intention is to work hard to bring forward a plan so that in the future—in the next 10 years—we can get to a situation in which our young people are not only safe and secure, but properly rehabilitated.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the additional £2 million that this Government have invested in providing handheld mobile detectors and portable detection poles to every prison to root out the mobile phones that facilitate so many problems. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to continue monitoring this issue and to consider what more can be done in this area?

Dr Lee: Yes. We have made some real progress; we are stopping thousands of mobile phones getting into our prisons. We are working extremely hard to stop the use of drones and to block the use of mobile phone signals over prisons. Things are not perfect; we have not finished this work, but we are continuing to press hard, because it would be fantastic to have a mobile phone and drone-free prison network.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I look forward to the strategy for women offenders that the Minister said he would introduce later this year. He will know that last year, 30% of women in custody self-harmed, and 12 women killed themselves in prison—the highest level since 2004. In reviewing the estate for women, will he take the opportunity, once and for all, to take on board the recommendations of Baroness Jean Corston? Women who need to be in custody should be placed not in prisons far from their families, but in small, secure community units. There is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do this. Please will the Minister take it?

Dr Lee: The Corston report was one of the first things I read when I was appointed to this role in July 2016, and it makes a persuasive case. There is an issue about where some women should be held. I am not completely convinced that we can go down the path of all women being held in community provision, in residential women's centres. However, I am persuaded that we can

reduce the number of women we are locking up. This will be based primarily on the way that we deliver community provision, and on mental health care before, during and after prison.

I have met a number of women in prison, the majority of whom have displayed scars of self-harm. As the hon. Lady might know, I am a doctor and I observe these things, and it is quite distressing to see this. To deal with the problem, we need to change the environment in which these women are held and to get their mental health services improved. Those are my two priorities, and I hope that the hon. Lady will be reassured that the strategy, which will be delivered by the end of this year, will get things right.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Listening to parents of young offenders in my constituency surgeries has been eye-opening, as is listening to those working in Winchester Prison, who have seen what happens to people who have never got out of the prison system. I welcome the focus on dealing with the growing level of violence and youth justice. It is vital that we look at those issues individually and at the outcomes. How will this new unit help to ensure that the recommendations are followed?

Dr Lee: The unit to which my hon. Friend refers has been set up by the Department to ensure that the recommendations are followed. I gather that this is the first time that such a unit has been created. With regard to youth justice and to women's justice, the key is to build a network over time—it will take a long time—that allows people to be held closer to home, so that families, and mothers in particular, can stay in contact with their children. That is our intention. I have mapped out the country with regard to women's justice and youth justice to ensure that what we bring forward fits the framework, so that we can deliver time in prison closer to home for women and young people.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): There is a grave situation in our prisons, and the Minister is being typically frank in acknowledging that. One problem is the large cohort of prisoners languishing on indeterminate sentences for public protection. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are committed to getting that number down as quickly as possible?

Dr Lee: That has been a long-running issue in the prison system, and the answer to my hon. Friend's question is yes.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Reoffending rates remain stubbornly high, especially for young offenders, with nearly seven out of 10 who are sent to prison going on to reoffend on release. We know that that is to do with the conditions and the environment in our prisons and young offender institutions, but what more can be done to ensure effective rehabilitation, especially for our young people?

Dr Lee: The recidivism rate in the youth estate is not acceptable, nor is the environment in which young people are being held. In some institutions, they are being locked up for too long, which is primarily to do with the safety and security of the institution. That needs to change. There are programmes in place—I

[*Dr Phillip Lee*]

have mentioned one already, with Saracens and other sports teams—that are showing evidence of reducing recidivism rates. I am determined to change the curriculum being delivered in the youth estate. People need to spend more time outside, on sport, for example. If we do that, we will achieve what my hon. Friend wants us to achieve. By early next year, I plan on bringing out a review of the criminal justice system and sport, particularly in the youth justice system. Its recommendations will be interesting to see.

Immigration Act 2016: Section 67

1.21 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will update the House on the implementation of section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016.

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): The Government are fully committed to helping and supporting the most vulnerable children, and we are contributing significantly to hosting, supporting and protecting vulnerable children affected by the migration crisis. This is part of our wider response of taking 23,000 people from the region. We have already granted asylum or another form of leave to more than 8,000 children and local authorities across the country are supporting more than 4,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Children transferred under section 67 are being cared for by local authorities across the country and we and they take our responsibility to those children very seriously. Safeguarding those children is paramount. Following consultation with local authorities, the Government have set the number of children who will be transferred under the scheme at 480. We have invited referrals of eligible children from France, Greece and Italy and our officials at the Home Office have visited those countries in recent months to put in place processes further to identify and transfer eligible children. In the past week I have spoken to my counterparts in Greece and Italy specifically on this issue, and I shall follow that up with face-to-face meetings in both countries next week.

It is important to remember that the processes for transferring children must be implemented in line with each member state's national laws and all transfers of children to the UK must be carried out safely and with the best interests of the children at the centre of all decisions. The ongoing work to transfer children under section 67 is in addition to our other commitments and we continue to work closely with member states and relevant partners to ensure that children with family in the UK can be transferred quickly and safely.

Our approach continues to be to take refugees directly from conflict regions, providing refugees with a more direct and safe route to our country rather than risking hazardous journeys to Europe. We are committed to resettling 23,000 people from the region and our resettlement schemes are some of the largest and longest-running in the EU. So far, we have resettled more than 7,000 people under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme and the vulnerable children resettlement scheme. Our schemes allow children to be resettled with their family members, thereby discouraging them from making perilous journeys to Europe alone.

It is worth noting that families continue to arrive from the region. Just yesterday, 199 individuals arrived and another 80 are due to arrive next week. That is all part of the Government's approach to helping the most vulnerable.

Tim Farron: I thank the Minister for his response, but it seems in the light of fact that those are somewhat hollow words. Before the election, the Government promised they would transfer 480 refugee children from Europe to the UK, but in the other place the Government

recently admitted that so far only 200 unaccompanied children have been given sanctuary here. When do the Government expect to fulfil this measly commitment, and will the Minister give us a date today?

I say that it is a measly commitment because the UK should do so much more. Freedom of Information Act requests show that local councils have voluntarily offered to accept 1,572 more children in addition to those they already support. Does the Minister know this? In light of this information, will the Government reopen Dubs and take their fair share?

As summer approaches, more are taking the dangerous crossings across the Mediterranean to reach the safety of European shores. More desperate, refugee children—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Stop the clock. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman but we cannot have two sets of exchanges taking place. There is a rather unseemly exchange between the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) and the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who are gesticulating at each other and in obvious dispute. They must calm themselves and listen to the Demosthenian eloquence of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), whose question this is.

Tim Farron: That is understandable, Mr Speaker; this subject raises passions, and rightly so.

Summer approaches and more are taking the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to reach European shores. More desperate refugee children without anyone looking after them will arrive in Europe, yet the Government have said that they will not consider taking any child under Dubs who arrived after their arbitrary cut-off date of 20 March 2016. In the light of the delays, which are the Government's fault, will they extend that cut-off date, which is as heartless as it is pointless?

Finally, I have visited the camps in Greece and elsewhere, which neither the Home Secretary nor the Prime Minister, who is, of course, the previous Home Secretary, have. I cannot forget what I have seen. I have met those children who, through no fault of their own, find their lives on pause as Ministers here choose to ignore them. How many children have been taken from Greece under the Dubs amendment to date? Have the UK Government even signed a memorandum of understanding with Greece to get these transfers under way? I know of two young people who signed a consent form to be transferred under Dubs more than a year ago. They are still stuck in Greece.

The horrific truth is that the longer this goes on the more likely it is that these children will go missing and fall into the evil hands of traffickers. According to Oxfam, 28 children every single day are going missing in Italy alone. Will the Government step up, or continue to ignore the plight of these desperate children?

Brandon Lewis: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman's comments are based on pretty much a series of false premises. I remind him that, as I have said, we have a range of schemes out there and are working to bring 23,000 people over. While he bandies around numbers I politely ask him to bear in mind that behind every number he talks about—some of which were wrong—there

is a child. It is important for us to ensure that those children get the care and support they need in the right time and the right place.

The hon. Gentleman talks about timelines, and he seems to forget that Italy and Greece are nation states, as is France. We must work around the timelines for them, too. He mentioned the FOI request concerning local authorities, which I am afraid is simply wrong. We consulted local authorities, which is what we said we would do when the legislation was in front of the House. That is what has led to the figure of 480, and the FOI request he is talking about does not consider what local authorities can provide. It is about the 0.7%¹ threshold, which is an entirely different calculation, so perhaps he should go away and look further at that.

We are very clear that we must ensure that we do not create a pull factor while at the same time doing the right thing, as we have done with the £2.46 billion of support that makes us one of the biggest contributors and covers the biggest humanitarian aid project this country has ever conducted, to look after the people who need our care the most. Instead of playing politics with children's lives, we should get on with looking after them and I wish the hon. Gentleman would join us in that.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I urge the Minister to keep the deadline in place. It is incredibly important that we do not encourage any more families to send their children on dangerous journeys. We should continue to take children directly from the region—directly from the camps—so that we can ensure they arrive safely. Encouraging the thought that if children get to Europe they will be able to stay is exactly what encourages the dangerous journeys that lead to their dying. I urge the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) to think carefully before he presses that course on the Government.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend, with his experience, is absolutely right: we must ensure that we do not create a pull factor. It must be remembered that under our schemes we have already brought over some 7,000² children from the region. I remind the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that the scheme is not closed. We are still working, and next week I shall go to Italy and Greece to talk to Ministers. The most vulnerable people are those who cannot afford to pay human traffickers—the children in the region, in Lebanon and in Jordan. They should be our focus, to ensure we do not, as my right hon. Friend said, create a pull factor.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The House understands the Government's preference to take unaccompanied children directly from the region. I have visited the camps in France and Greece. The Minister needs to be reminded that the children are already there, often living in horrible conditions and at the mercy of traffickers and sexual exploitation. How many children in 2017-18 will come into this country under section 67? How many children will come in under Dublin? How long, on average, has each case taken? What is the future of close family reunion once we leave the European Union? Will the Government consider expanding UK immigration rights so that a

1. [Official Report, 5 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 1MC.]

2. [Official Report, 5 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 1MC.]

[*Ms Diane Abbott*]

child's right to family reunion in the broad sense is in no way diminished, or will the Government simply walk away from their moral obligations?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Lady's final point does not do her, this House or this country justice. We—councils, charity groups and individuals—should be proud of the phenomenal work being done across the country, including the £1 million community sponsorship scheme that the Home Secretary announced last night, to welcome the most vulnerable people. It is right that we look to see who are the most vulnerable—who cannot afford to pay human traffickers, and who need our support in the region—rather than those who are in European countries. We are still bringing people over under the agreements with European countries, but I remind the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that we must work according to the rules and laws in these countries—they are nation states. Our position on what will happen once we leave the European Union has been clear. The fact that we are running the biggest humanitarian project this country has seen highlights the Government's determination to do the right thing. We will continue to seek to do so and to fulfil our moral duty to those who need our help most.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The protestations of Opposition Members would have more credibility if they acknowledged the huge effort and huge resources that the Government have put in to date. I too have been to Athens to see the camps and the fantastic work being done there, but there is a criticism: it is taking too long to process and assess children who have a right to be here. Will the Minister acknowledge that post-Brexit, when presumably we will come out of the Dublin III scheme, there will be a problem with children under the family reunion scheme? Can we ensure that they will still be matched with relatives beyond their parents, because many of them will have lost their parents but will have siblings, uncles and others with whom they may be safely and appropriately placed?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I appreciate the time he spent explaining to me what he saw at the camps, which I shall visit next week. He is right: all of us in this country should be proud of the finance and focus we provide, but for every 3,000 people we bring over and help we could be helping 800,000 people in the region. We therefore must be very clear about our focus. As I said, we are clear that post-Brexit we shall want to continue to do the right thing for vulnerable people in the region. I shall be happy to work with him to deliver that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this question. I make it clear to the Minister that what the hon. Member said was not based on false premises. I am able to say that because last week I attended the launch of a report from the Human Trafficking Foundation, following an

independent inquiry into separated and unaccompanied minors in Europe. The inquiry found that UK Ministers have done

“as little as legally possible”

to help unaccompanied children who have fled war and conflict in their home nations; have turned away from a humanitarian crisis that “would not be tolerable” to the British public if they were more aware of it; and that by failing to offer safe passage are “unquestionably” fuelling both people trafficking and smuggling. Those are not my words but the findings of an independent inquiry. What will the Minister do about it? [*Interruption.*] There is no point in shouting at me because the Minister and his colleagues do not like the independent inquiry's findings. The British public deserve to know about this. What steps are the Government taking to resolve the blockages in the transfer of Dubs children, which we voted for in the House last year, thinking there would be 3,000 transfers? When do they expect the transfers to begin?

Brandon Lewis: Transfers have been happening, and we are determined to deliver on exactly what we set out. We will continue to do so—it is part of the 23,000 people, and it should be remembered that we have brought over 7,000¹ children already. I encourage more people to look at what she refers to as an independent report, one of the co-authors of which is a recently retired Labour Member of Parliament. Fiona Mactaggart's foreword makes many accusations and statements that have no evidence base whatsoever. I disagree with the report, but my point about the freedom of information request and several of the other statements that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale made being based on false premises still stands.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As well as accepting refugees into this country the United Kingdom is the second largest donor to the crisis following the United States and has given more than the rest of the European Union combined. I support the Government having a holistic, comprehensive approach. Will my right hon. Friend continue to commit the Government to providing the right help in the right places?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is important that we focus our help on the most vulnerable in the places that most need that support, while doing what we can as part of our work with our European partners to support those whom we have agreed to support.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister knows that helping children in the region and those in Europe and already here is not an either/or. Parliament told the Government to help lone child refugees in Europe when it passed the Dubs amendment last year. I know the Government did not want to agree to it, but it was passed. The way in which they have narrowed the criteria, dragged their feet, and failed even to count councils' offers properly is shameful. Will he confirm that they have helped only 200 children under the Dubs amendment, despite the fact that councils have offered nearly 500 places, and that there are tens of thousands of child refugees still alone in Europe? Italy and Greece cannot cope with what they are having to deal with. It is shameful that all he has managed to do is

¹.[*Official Report*, 5 September 2017, Vol. 628, c. 2MC.]

send a few officials to Italy and Greece to try to arrange a few procedures for the future, when this has been going on for years. Stop the warm words about helping the most vulnerable children and actually get on with it, as Parliament said the Government should.

Brandon Lewis: We are clear about wanting to give children the right support and ensuring they have the support network to be an important and valued part of our community. It is important that we do so within what local authorities can provide, bearing in mind the restrictions and capacity they have. In 2016 we granted asylum or some form of leave to over 8,000 children, and since 2010 we have done so for some 42,000 children. We are doing our bit. We want to continue to do that work. Other countries have their own rules and regulations. I am sure the right hon. Lady will appreciate from her previous role that we have to work with them and with what works with the laws. We shall continue to do so, which is why I will visit Italy and Greece to meet my counterparts next week.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I know that everybody is incredibly passionate about this issue, but I hope that we can collectively be proud of what the country as a whole has contributed to help with the refugee crisis in Syria, because it is tremendous. I am glad that the Minister is going to visit the camps; that does rather shift someone's perception about how the picture forms overall. The Government and I have different views on Dubs, and I still maintain that more capacity is available in our councils and country to help.

Further to what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, I am particularly concerned about what will happen to Dublin III as we move towards this brave new Brexit world. How many children have come to the UK this year under Dublin III already? How will we make sure that the legislation is embedded in our own laws when we leave the EU?

Brandon Lewis: I take my hon. Friend's point about local authorities. We will continue to work with them; our numbers are based on the information that they have given us through roadshows and conversations we have had directly. We will continue to look at the numbers that they feed in, as we deal with children and bring them over within our schemes and commitments.

On Dublin going forward, as I said earlier I can give an assurance that we are determined to fulfil our commitments. Obviously, as we go through the negotiations on leaving the European Union, it is too soon to say exactly what technical format that will take. However, we are determined to stick with our moral and ethical duty as we continue to provide support to the people who need it most, through the Dublin agreement.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The Minister gets the message: the whole House wants the process to be enacted as speedily as possible. May I take him back to one of the points made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about the Mediterranean summer crisis that will unfold? What additional help is being given to enable those with some responsibility in Libya to prevent boats from setting off

on the Mediterranean? Those journeys will result only in people—children, especially—dying before they reach the mainland.

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman has vast experience in this area and he makes an important point. It is very important that in this discussion we do not lose sight of what continues to happen in the Mediterranean. We are working closely with member state authorities and all our partners, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other non-governmental organisations, to agree what more we can do in that region.

The Prime Minister made a statement and announcement after the last EU Council meeting. We will continue to deliver on that, to make sure that we do two things: that we do not create a pull factor and that we give a clear message that people should not make that treacherous journey. That is why it is so important that we continue our phenomenal work with the £2.46 billion spend, along with the £10 million from the Department for International Development, to work with people in the region and make sure that things there are as safe and flexible as possible.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has set out, tackling this problem at source and dealing with the trafficking are crucial. Will he outline what the British security services and police are doing with European counterparts to track down, arrest and prosecute people traffickers who wish to profit directly by exploiting the situation?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is important that we continue to give a clear message about the atrocious and completely unacceptable behaviour of the disgraceful traffickers out there who continue to ply their despicable trade. The European Migrant Smuggling Centre was formed in February this year in response to the increase in the number of irregular migrants. We continue to work with our partners, along with Europol and our National Crime Agency, to focus on and drive out that form of trafficking, as well as the organised crime that thrives around it. There has to be a clear message at every stage. That despicable behaviour is not acceptable and it needs to end.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know from the response of the High Court to the judicial review of the consultation on the places available for children in the UK, section 67 is explicitly about families in Europe. May I ask him about a specific case that I wrote to his office about more than a week ago, involving an incredibly vulnerable Syrian family in Lille who have been wrongly refused the right to come to the UK under the Dublin regulations? I have not yet had even an acknowledgment from his office of receipt of that correspondence. Will the Minister meet me to urgently review this case of a suicidal mother and her young children and discuss how we can improve how people claim asylum and come to the UK, so that it is not only the smugglers who meet them in Calais?

Brandon Lewis: As the hon. Lady will appreciate, I am not going to comment on a particular case today, but as soon as I leave the Dispatch Box I will chase up

[*Brandon Lewis*]

the case she mentions and why she has not had a response. I will make sure that she gets one as soon as possible.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last year, I visited the Zaatari refugee camp on the Syrian border in Jordan. It was clear from conversations with parents that although they did not want to risk their children's lives across the sea, they would if there were no jobs or education for them. Does the Minister agree that thanks to the UK Government's 0.7% aid contribution, we are able to keep people well and safe in their own region rather than risking squalor in the European camps?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend's excellent point highlights why it is so important for us to continue to do that work in the region. We should be proud of the time, effort and money being spent out there and of the work of the charities as well as the Government in making sure that we do everything we can to help people in the region and deal with the challenges at source. In that way, we can prevent people not only from taking the chance to come to places that are not appropriate for them but from making that treacherous journey and giving profit to human traffickers in the first place.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to the fact that I am to be an unpaid director of the Human Trafficking Foundation; that will appear shortly in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

What would the Minister say to Tory-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council, which on Monday suspended support for unaccompanied children despite having places available? One of the senior councillors said that it was because the children come here of their own volition. Is that not simply a disgrace? Is it not also a disgrace that they have turned around and blamed the Government? Is it not about time that the Minister got his act together with his Tory colleagues and stopped unaccompanied children fleeing war and persecution taking the consequences of this disastrous Government policy?

Brandon Lewis: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the role that he is about to take up, and I look forward to working with him to do something about what we agree on: driving out human trafficking completely.

I am pleased that a Conservative authority took control of Nottinghamshire County Council a few weeks ago in local elections. I learned many years ago at this Dispatch Box to make sure that I understood the full details and both sides of any particular case before I comment on it. I will look into what the hon. Gentleman said and talk to Nottinghamshire County Council before I comment any further.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked of "hollow words"; in fact, the Government's response has been generous—it is, if I may say so, a typically British generous response to this crisis. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the number of refugees that this country is helping and compare it with the equivalent figures for other EU states?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Just this week, the Home Secretary and I launched and put extra funding into the community support project. We have seen phenomenal work, which people should be proud of, in charities and communities, developing and learning from colleagues from countries around the world such as Canada. I appreciate the time that the Canadian Minister gave us to discuss the issues. My hon. Friend is right: last year alone, we took in more than any other country in Europe. We should be proud of that, but we are clear that we want to build on that. We should be very proud of the fact that we are looking to bring over 23,000 people, to make sure that we are helping the most vulnerable—including the many thousands of children who have already come over and others who will continue to come.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Minister will have on his desk petitions from children at St Matthew's Primary School and Moss Park Infants School in my constituency asking him to respect the rights of all refugee children under the United Nations convention on the rights of the child—their right to an education, in particular. What assessment is he really making of the quality and experience of education that children are getting in camps? Is it not time that we brought children here to settle them and ensure that they have the chance to develop a happy and successful childhood?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady is effectively agreeing with the point I made earlier. We are working with local authorities to make sure that when children come over, they are given the right support and the home that they deserve, to help them be an important part of the community and give them a fruitful and fulfilling life.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that unaccompanied minors are again congregating in and around Calais? But without the camps, there are now even fewer resources. Safe Passage UK and Refugees Welcome are organising a cross-party group of MPs to go there next month. If the Minister is listening, perhaps he would also like to go there to explain what he and his French counterpart are doing to ensure that children with rights under Dublin or Dubs come to this country for safety, rather than stay on the streets of Calais?

Brandon Lewis: Not only have I met Safe Passage UK and explained the slightly different view that I saw when I was in Calais about 10 days ago, but I am discussing the matter with French authorities and the operators out there.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Many of us do not understand why the Government chose to put a limit on the Dubs scheme based on a rather half-baked consultation with local authorities at one particular time. Why do the Government not continue to engage with local authorities and take proactive steps to increase their capacity to take unaccompanied children, including by implementing fully funded places?

Brandon Lewis: First, that is what the amendment and the legislation said we should do. Secondly, I come back to a point I have made a few times. When we bring people—including families and, most importantly,

vulnerable children—over, it is important that we have the facilities and capacity to give them the best start in life. I come back to the point I made earlier. Yes, people will want to play politics with numbers, as some Opposition Members unfortunately do, but the reality is that there is a child behind every number. We need to ensure that if we are bringing children over, we can give them the best possible start. The hon. Gentleman should be proud, as I outlined to the Scottish Minister when I met her last week, that we have already granted asylum or some other form of leave to more than 8,000 children. We have to remember that.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Europol has estimated that more than 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees have disappeared in Europe over the past two years. What steps are the Government taking to address that and to support our EU partners in improving protection for unaccompanied children at risk of trafficking or exploitation?

Brandon Lewis: There are two sides to this. First, we must ensure that we do not create a pull factor that encourages more children and other individuals to take that treacherous journey, which simply helps the profits of the traffickers we all hope to see driven out. It is also about working with our partners and the National Crime Agency, which is working with Europol, to ensure that we track down and catch the people who commit these awful crimes.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Organisations such as Refuweegee are doing a great deal to welcome asylum seekers and refugees to Glasgow. What can the Minister do to ensure that there is adequate funding for local authorities so that those who arrive with nothing get all the support they require to lead a life with dignity?

Brandon Lewis: I fully agree that there is some really good work in Glasgow. I had that conversation with the Scottish Minister last week. A number of local authorities around the country are doing such work. It comes back to the point I have been making: it is very important that we work with local authorities to ensure that they have the capacity, resources, ability and properties to give people who come over the right start in life and the protection, security and safety they deserve.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) prepares to step down from the leadership of his party, I thank him not only for his question today, but for his unfailing courtesy and his personal support for the Chair over a very long period, for which I have reason to be very grateful.

Point of Order

1.53 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will know that page 448 of “Erskine May” states:

“It is not in order to refer to persons in the galleries”.

This is a very old tradition of the House that goes back to clearing the Galleries by saying, “I spy strangers.” The ruling has been strictly enforced in our time, but in recent years lots of Members have referred to people in the Gallery. It was particularly nice the other day when my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) referred to her mother in the Gallery as she paid tribute to her during her maiden speech. The Prime Minister referred to people in the Gallery today, and sometimes we refer to international guests. Is not now the time to completely and utterly get rid of this rather silly and old-fashioned rule?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is, not for the first time, spot on. The prohibition on reference to those attending our proceedings—let me say it candidly—no longer applies. It dates back to a time when the act of noticing such attendance led to the Galleries being cleared, since public attendance was not, in formal terms, allowed for at all. For some time, I have not sought to enforce the rule, nor—to the best of my knowledge and understanding—has it been enforced in Westminster Hall. I hope that Members are adapting gently to this new regime. Reference to visitors must be brief and directly related to proceedings. Such references should not be phrased so as to be in any way intimidating or to seek to influence debate. The House’s guidance, including “Erskine May”, will be gradually updated to reflect this change. I hope that is helpful.

I know that other Members have a desire to raise points of order. I would rather not take further points of order now. We ordinarily take points of order after statements and I see no good reason to change that practice today. I took this particular point of order because I thought it best that I should be here in the Chair, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was here. I am about to leave and the Chairman of Ways and Means will chair the pensions statement, towards the end of which I will return. Members who are poised and perched, ready to raise their points of order on other matters, can do so at that time.

Pensions

1.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on pensions.

Last year, the Government commissioned the Government Actuary and John Cridland CBE to produce independent reports to inform the first review of the state pension age required under the Pensions Act 2014. I am grateful to Mr Cridland for his contribution in producing a thorough and comprehensive review. Over the course of his review, evidence was put forward by a wide range of people and organisations. I am grateful to everyone who took the time to engage. Today I am publishing the Government's report on this review.

The Government are determined to deliver dignity and security in retirement, fairness across the generations, and the certainty that people need to plan for old age. In the report, I set out how we will achieve these things. As part of this publication, we have set out a coherent strategy targeted at strengthening and sustaining the UK's pensions system for many decades to come. This is about the Government taking responsible action in response to growing demographic and fiscal pressures. That is why I am today announcing the Government's intention to accept the key recommendation of the Cridland review and increase the state pension age from 67 to 68 over two years from 2037. This brings forward the increase by seven years from its legislated date of 2044 to 2046, in line with the recommendation made by John Cridland, and following careful consideration of the evidence on life expectancy, fairness and public finances.

When the modern state pension was introduced in 1948, a 65-year-old could expect to live for a further 13½ years. By 2007, when further legislation was introduced to increase state pension age, this had risen to around 21 years, and it is expected to be nearly 25 years in 2037. As the Cridland review makes clear, the increases in life expectancy are to be celebrated. I also want to make it clear that, even under the timetable for the rise I am announcing today, future pensioners can still expect to spend on average more than 22 years in receipt of the state pension. But increasing longevity also presents challenges for the Government. There is a balance to be struck between the funding of the state pension in years to come while also ensuring fairness for future generations of taxpayers.

The approach I am setting out today is the responsible and fair course of action. Failing to act now in the light of compelling evidence of demographic pressures would be irresponsible, and place an extremely unfair burden on younger generations. Although an ageing population means that state pension spending will rise under any of the possible timetables we have considered, the action we are taking reduces this rise by 0.4% of GDP in 2039-40. That is equivalent to a saving of around £400 per household, based on the number of households today.

Our proposed timetable will save £74 billion to 2045-46 when compared with current plans, and more than £250 billion to 2045-46 when compared with capping the rise in state pension age at 66 in 2020, as the Labour party has advocated. It is the duty of a responsible Government to keep the state pension sustainable and maintain fairness between generations. That is why the

Government are aiming for the proportion of adult life spent in receipt of state pension to be "up to 32%". This is a fair deal for current and future pensioners.

We will carry out a further review before legislating to bring forward the rise in state pension age to 68, to enable consideration of the latest life expectancy projections and to allow us to evaluate the effects of rises in state pension age already under way. This Government have a proven track record on helping people plan for their retirement. Alongside our automatic enrolment scheme, which has already brought the benefits of private pensions to nearly 10 million people since its inception, we have also set out plans to enhance the availability of impartial consumer advice through schemes such as the single financial guidance body and the pensions dashboard. Today, people have a much better idea of what their pension will be, bringing more certainty and clarity. That is something the Government will build on; making it easier for people to seek advice and make effective financial decisions.

I want Britain to be the best country in the world in which to grow old, where everyone enjoys the dignity and security they deserve in retirement. At the same time, we need to ensure that the costs of an ageing population are shared out fairly, without placing an unfair tax burden on future generations. To deliver that, we need to make responsible choices on the state pension age, and that is what the Government are doing today.

2.1 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and for arranging to let me have sight of it 30 minutes ago.

Yesterday, the renowned expert on life expectancy, Professor Sir Michael Marmot, described how a century-long rise in life expectancy was

"pretty close to having ground to a halt"

since 2010, when this Government began their failing austerity programme. Last week, evidence from Public Health England showed how deep inequalities in healthy life expectancy remain, both regionally and between different groups in our society, including women, disabled people and black and minority ethnic groups. It is therefore astonishing that today this Government choose to implement their plans to speed up the state pension age increase to 68.

Most pensioners will now spend their retirement battling a toxic cocktail of ill health, with men expecting to drift into ill health at 63, five years earlier than this proposed quickened state pension age of 68, and women expecting to see signs of ill health at 64. This national picture masks even worse regional inequalities. Men who live in Nottingham are likely to suffer ill health from the age of 57, a full 11 years earlier, under this Government's shortened plans, than a state pension age of 68. The Government talk about making Britain fairer, but their pensions policy, whether on the injustice that 1950s-born women are facing or on today's proposal to increase the state pension age to 68, is anything but fair.

The Government claim that it is young people who will have to bear the burden of the state pension, but in fact it is the young who have to bear the burden of the cuts that they are facing already—cuts to education,

housing and working age social security—as well as the Government’s endless extensions of the state pension age. Sadly, like much of the Conservatives’ policy platform, their approach to this matter appears to have changed little since their election manifesto. At that time, they promised to

“ensure that the state pension age reflects increases in life expectancy, while protecting each generation fairly.”

How does today’s statement meet the promise made in the manifesto, given the evidence on life expectancy that we have seen in the past week? What conversations has the Minister had with his new friends in the Democratic Unionist party, whose manifesto promised advocating “for the interests of our older people”?

Perhaps, as the Pensions Minister astonishingly suggested in a debate earlier this month, the Government will force people in their mid-60s to seek out an apprenticeship. A constituent of mine, hearing that suggestion, visited our local jobcentre in Oldham, only to find that the adviser had no idea of any apprenticeship support or Government employment support available to a woman of her age. The Pensions Minister’s position was not one shared by Mr Cridland, who suggested that the social security system must be able to support those who find themselves unable to work. Perhaps Mr Cridland was unaware of the seven years of slash-and-burn policy on our social security system; the so-called “safety net” is increasingly inadequate, driving up pensioner poverty by 300,000.

Labour wants a different approach. In our manifesto, we committed to leaving the state pension age at 66 while we undertake a review into healthy life expectancy, arduous work and the potential of a flexible state pension age. We want an evidence-based approach to build a state pensions system that brings security for the many, not just the privileged few, so that we can all enjoy a healthy retirement.

Mr Gauke: Even by the standards of the Labour party, its approach to the state pension age is reckless, short-sighted and irresponsible. When the evidence in front of us shows that life expectancy will continue to increase by a little over one year every eight years that pass, fixing the state pension age at 66, as advocated by the Labour party, demonstrates a complete failure to appreciate the situation in front of us. Compared with the timetable set out by this Government, Labour’s approach will add £250 billion to national debt. Let us put that in context: it is almost twice as much as was disbursed into the financial sector following the financial crisis. Let us put it another way: spending in 2040 on the state pension would be £20 billion a year higher under Labour’s plans than under the plans we are setting out—that is almost twice the Home Office budget. Where on earth is this money coming from? Even the—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. In fairness, I want to hear both sides so that we can make a judgment, and I am finding it very hard to hear the Minister. This is in a reply to the shadow Minister, so we all ought to be able to hear the answer.

Mr Gauke: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Even the last Labour Government, who were not known for their fiscal rectitude, legislated to increase the state pension age to 68. Yet on top of a long list of unaffordable spending pledges, the Labour party now happily makes

pledges on the state pension that it must know will cause unsustainable damage to the public finances.

The facts are, based on the most up-to-date evidence, and clearly set out in the Government Actuary’s report and John Cridland’s report, that life expectancy is going up. Healthy life expectancy at the age of 65 is also going up. The Government have to face up to this long-term challenge and not pretend that it does not exist. We should celebrate increased life expectancy, but it has consequences for fiscal sustainability that cannot be ignored. The Cridland review is a serious piece of work with a clear recommendation on the pension age. In contrast with the Labour party, we will act responsibly and accept that recommendation.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement. The Labour party used to work on a consensual basis, given the facts, but it has now departed from that. He is aware that we have a proud track record in reform, for example, in respect of automatic enrolment and the single tier. We also got rid of the default retirement age, where people were forced to retire when they did not want to do so. It is the Conservatives who have a proud record. The single figure that stands out starkly from this review is that if we do nothing about this, it will cost £250 billion more. That is not just a figure, as it will be borne by future generations, as they will have to pay excessive moneys. Given that the Labour party at the last election promised to get rid of the student debt and now reneges on that, does my right hon. Friend think that Labour will be doing the same very shortly on this one?

Mr Gauke: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He makes some good points about the work the Government have done over the past seven years in terms of fuller working lives and helping more people to work longer, and he has a proud personal record in what he did on that as Secretary of State. He is absolutely right to highlight the irresponsibility of the position Labour Members had at the last election. Just as they have walked away from a deeply irresponsible position on student debt, I hope they will walk away from a deeply irresponsible position on the state pension age.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. I can see why the Department for Work and Pensions did not want to publish this report by the date it was supposed to have been published by—7 May—because it would undoubtedly have lost the Conservatives more seats than they did lose.

The SNP opposes plans to raise the state pension age above 66. We also have concerns about the fact that the Government have chosen the 32% rather than the 33.3%, which was the more gentle of the scenarios presented in the Cridland review. I am lucky enough to be a few days inside the 69 group, so I will get to retire at 69 rather than 70, which people a couple of weeks younger than me will retire at if the full extent of the 32% in the Cridland review is implemented.

The SNP continues to call for the establishment of an independent savings and pensions commission. The Government are not doing enough to recognise demographic differences across the United Kingdom,

[*Kirsty Blackman*]

and an independent review would look at those and take them into full account.

Mr Gauke: John Cridland looked at exactly those issues and concluded that the divergence within the regions and nations on this matter was greater than the divergence between them. However, if the Scottish Government believe that there should be more support from the state for those approaching retirement age, they will have the power to provide it. If they wish to provide that support in Scotland—effectively, providing support a year or two years earlier than in the rest of the United Kingdom—they have the power to do that. I would not particularly advise them to do it, but that is their decision, and I really do not think there is a complaint to be raised with the UK Government on that front.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his statement. He is right to be tackling the issues of intergenerational fairness, but retirement is not about the state alone. What other measures, alongside this one on intergenerational fairness, will he propose to ensure that younger people can save for their retirement alongside state provision?

Mr Gauke: One thing I would highlight, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) did a moment ago, is what we have done on auto-enrolment. That means 10 million more people saving for retirement, which is a huge step forward. I am delighted with the success of auto-enrolment—the very low opt-out rates—and that is one example of how the Government are ensuring that people will have a dignified retirement, but we must remember that the public finances need to be in good order as well.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Bearing in mind regional health inequalities, what steps will the Government introduce in terms of social security to support those who will not be able to work until this later age?

Mr Gauke: As a country we spend very large sums—something like £50 billion a year—on support for people with health and disability issues, and we will obviously continue to do that. That is the best way of supporting people who have health difficulties, rather than by having a lower state pension age, which would be unaffordable.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State, although perhaps with not too much enthusiasm, for delaying my retirement by a year. I think I am in exactly the range of people whose retirement has just been delayed. What plans does he have to learn from the issues that arose from previous increases in the retirement age about communicating to people that this change will affect them?

Mr Gauke: First, I should say that the longer we can delay my hon. Friend's retirement, the better that will be all round.

In terms of communicating with those affected, we are giving something like 20 years' notice today, but as

we legislate in due course, it will of course be necessary to communicate properly with those who are affected. [*Interruption.*] It will be done properly. It is proper that we communicate with those people, and we will do so.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State's Department taking to ensure that older people are not subject to the Government's punitive sanctions regime?

Mr Gauke: The number of sanctions is down by about half in the last year. We have a welfare system that has at its heart the principle of conditionality for many benefits, and to enforce conditions it is necessary to have a sanctions regime. However, the vast majority—something like 98%—of benefit claimants are not sanctioned.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): With respect to the statement, my right hon. Friend will be aware that 300 people reached the age of 100 in 1952, when Her Majesty the Queen came to the throne; last year, it was over 13,000. Is he surprised, as I am, at the irresponsibility and recklessness of the Labour party in resisting some of these measures?

Mr Gauke: I do not know whether I am surprised any more by anything that the Labour party does, but it is disappointing. The reality is that we have an ageing population, just as every similar country does. We all have to respond to the facts, and the facts are that, as the population ages, and as life expectancy—and indeed healthy life expectancy—improves, it is necessary for the state pension age to reflect that. To deny that is just to deny common sense.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I had hoped that the Minister was coming here today because he had seen the light; that he had realised that the women from the 1950s have been dealt a terrible set of cards by this Government; that he was going to compensate them; that he was going to make good on the injustice that has been done to them; that he was going to make sure that every single person who was not even notified by the Government that they would be caught by the proposed measures would be compensated; and that he was finally going to acknowledge that women in my constituency who are in their 60s, who say to me that they are completely clapped out because they have had tough, laborious jobs all their lives, are the very people one of his Ministers said should now take up an apprenticeship. How dull are Ministers?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure I would want to call my constituents clapped out, but there we go. The position when it comes to those born in the 1950s, just as with this announcement on those born in the 1970s, is that we have to balance the need and the desire to provide a dignified retirement with the fact that state pensions have to be paid for, and it is unfair on taxpayers if we do not have a state pension age that reflects life expectancy. That is all we are saying, and it seems to me to be very hard to argue against.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to go ahead with the main recommendation in the Cridland report, which, critically, gives advance notice of more than 20 years to those who will be affected, thereby distinguishing this

Government's record from that of the previous Labour Government, who failed to communicate adequately their changes to women's state pension provision. Will my right hon. Friend confirm, first, that there will be a comprehensive communication programme to make sure everybody knows about these changes in advance and, secondly, whether the Government accept the Cridland report's other recommendations, on means-tested benefits, working past the state pension age and the auto-enrolment review?

Mr Gauke: We are looking carefully at the other Cridland recommendations. Obviously, there are issues that have an impact across Government, but it is right to move swiftly on the key recommendation—on the state pension age—to give people as much advance notice as possible. However, my hon. Friend makes a good point about the communication process and so on, and those things will need to be determined nearer the time. As I said, we are 20 years away from the point at which this change takes effect, but we are determined to ensure that it is brought to the attention of all those who are affected.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): On the issue of the WASPI women raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the essence of their complaint, in some respects, is the fact that some of them were not even notified of the change that had occurred. Some were notified late, some were notified after it happened, and some received no notification at all. This point has been put time and again to the Government, and it is about time they came up with an answer to it. Instead of driving the WASPI women to take court action, why do not the Government give them a fair deal?

Mr Gauke: Some 5 million letters were sent out to the addresses that the Government had. As I say, the changes made in the 1995 Act were many, many years in advance of when they took effect. None of those women born in the 1950s had had their state pension age put back by more than 18 months by the Pensions Act 2011.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Demographic pressures are felt acutely across East Sussex, where we have the most 85-year-olds, most of whom live in my constituency. With life expectancy increasing at birth and at older ages, can my right hon. Friend confirm that, looking ahead, people, including those who live in my constituency, can expect to receive more state pension over their lifetimes than generations before?

Mr Gauke: That is absolutely right. Looking ahead, every generation will spend more years, on average, receiving a state pension than the previous generation. That is a very good thing, but it is right that we get the balance right. If Governments do not address this issue, we end up with a crisis, end up having to move quickly, and end up with sharp increases in the state pension age. That is what we are avoiding through the responsible approach we are taking today.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am the father of three young daughters. Office for National Statistics figures say that one of them will live to be 100, and that

by the time they retire, there will be only two workers in this country for every retired person. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is blindingly obvious that we need to take the steps that he has outlined today? It should not be a cause of regret—it should be a cause of celebration that our children and grandchildren are going to live to such a grand old age—and it should be treated on a cross-party basis as the perfectly responsible action that any Government should be taking.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend puts it very well. It is a cause of celebration that life expectancy is improving, but along with changes in life expectancy, inevitably, there are changes in the state pension age, as the change announced today demonstrates.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that thanks to the financial responsibility shown hitherto, we have managed in the past seven years to increase state pensions quite generously by £1,250 a year, and that is why pensioner poverty has gone down?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In order to do that, we need to take responsible decisions on the public finances as a whole, including on the state pension age. That is what we will continue to do, even if we will not get Labour's support.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As someone who had their state pension age increased to 68 back in 2007, along with everyone slightly older than me and everyone younger than me, I have listened with incredulity to some of the comments made this afternoon. How does this compare with the situation in other countries—for example, the Republic of Ireland? Presumably it is not just a challenge unique to the United Kingdom.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are seeing increases in the state pension age in the Republic of Ireland, in the Netherlands, and in Denmark. It is what responsible Governments do and what responsible parties support. Unfortunately we have only one responsible party in this country.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I pay tribute to the Cridland report, which is, in part, as excellent as it is because John Cridland was educated at Boston Grammar School in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that by taking responsible, brave decisions, and having reviews such as the Cridland review, we avoid the situation that countries such as Italy find themselves in, where the pension age has to be increased, in one go, by four and a half years? This is the responsible thing to do and the fair thing to do.

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We could have put this off, failed to address it, or kicked it into the long grass, but it is important for the future of this country that we have a Government who are prepared to take these long-term decisions, securing intergenerational fairness and ensuring that we provide more certainty to pensioners that there will not be the need for the sudden changes that may be seen elsewhere.

Points of Order

2.25 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday's Order Paper said that the debate on drugs could continue until 7 o'clock. The final speaker sat down four minutes early. The normal practice in this House is then to use that time for other speakers to contribute. It was particularly interesting that the final speaker, the Minister, had denied interventions on the grounds that she did not have enough time to finish. The Standing Orders are not clear on this point. Is it not right that we get some definition of past practice in relation to cases where speakers do not have anything else left to say and other Members can contribute to what would then be a full debate?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice somewhat earlier of his intention to raise it. I am loth to quibble with the hon. Gentleman, who is a considerable authority on matters parliamentary, as evidence by the well-thumbed tome on how to be a Back Bencher of which he is the distinguished author. That said, I am inclined slightly to quibble with him on his proposition that it is normal or commonplace, if a ministerial wind-up concludes early, for other Members to be invited to contribute. In my experience, that is not commonplace. I would not say that it never happens, because you can almost always find an example of something if you try hard enough, but certainly when I am in the Chair I tend to work on the assumption that the ministerial wind-up is indeed the conclusion of the debate.

I note what the hon. Gentleman says about the conclusion of this debate taking place earlier than listed on the Order Paper, although I am sure that he will readily accept that the *Official Report*—that is to say, the verbatim account of what was said; there is no question of misleading anybody—will show that the debate concluded a little early. The Chair does not normally allow a further Back-Bench speech, and—this is not directed at the hon. Gentleman; it is just a wider point—certainly not from a Member who had already made a substantial speech in the debate.

As for interventions, the hon. Gentleman, as the author of “How To Be An MP”—available in all good bookshops, and of which I am myself a noted admirer, as he knows—he will appreciate that a Member is free to take interventions or not. I note what he tells me—that the Minister said, “No, I can't take interventions because I haven't time”—but that is not something on which the Chair can rule. Sometimes Ministers can be a tad neurotic in these circumstances, it is true, as can sometimes, perhaps, shadow Ministers, but that is not a matter for the Chair. Whether the Member seeking to intervene likes it or not, the situation is as I have described.

Let me take this opportunity, in a positive spirit, to encourage all new Members—I am not sure the Whips would agree about this—to read the hon. Gentleman's books on being a good parliamentarian. [*Interruption.*] “No!” says a Government Whip, chuntering from a sedentary position, in evident horror at what bad habits new members of the flock might pick up. I think that they are fine tomes. The hon. Gentleman has used his position as a Back-Bench Member to stand up for his

constituents and to fight for the principles in which he believes. That has sometimes pleased his party and sometimes not, but that is what we are supposed to get here—Members of Parliament who speak to their principles and their consciences. That is a good thing, and, as he knows, I like to encourage it. In fact, when I was a Back Bencher, I had a relationship with my Whips characterised by trust and understanding—I didn't trust them and they didn't understand me.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Department of Health accounts were finally laid before the House, after a week of to-ing and fro-ing that prompted no actual changes, as I understand it, to them. The Comptroller and Auditor General has raised some concerns about the accounts. I seek your guidance on two points, Mr Speaker. First, the accounts have again been laid late. Last year, they were laid on the final day on which Parliament sat; this time, they were laid only a couple of days before the final day. Secondly, what can we do to ensure that a Minister turns up to the House to explain the Department of Health accounts and address the financial concerns that many Members of the House, and not least the Public Accounts Committee, have about the Government's handling of health finances?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who has put her concern on the record. It will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench, and I suspect that the contents of her point of order will wing their way to Health Ministers ere long. The truth of the matter is that there is no resolution of her grievance available from the Chair. The Select Committee on Health may wish to return to this matter if it is dissatisfied, and the Public Accounts Committee, of which the hon. Lady is herself the distinguished Chair, may wish to pursue this matter further. Realistically, I fear that that will have to wait until September, although if the hon. Lady—she is of course a London Member, and a very assiduous attender—is present in her place tomorrow for the summer Adjournment debate and wishes to expatiate further on her concerns, she may well find she is able to catch the eye of the Chair.

If there are no further points of order—I think that there are none—we come now to the presentation of Bills.

BILLS PRESENTED

ASSAULTS ON EMERGENCY WORKERS (OFFENCES) BILL Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Bryant, supported by Holly Lynch, Stephen Crabb, Mr Graham Brady, Ms Harriet Harman, Mr Dominic Grieve, Jo Stevens, Diana Johnson, Tulip Siddiq, Lilian Greenwood, Carolyn Harris and Philip Davies, presented a Bill to make provision about offences when perpetrated against emergency workers, and persons assisting such workers; to make certain offences aggravated when perpetrated against such workers in the exercise of their duty; to require persons suspected of certain assaults against such workers which may pose a health risk to provide intimate samples and to make it an offence, without reasonable excuse, to refuse to provide such samples; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 October, and to be printed (Bill 7).

MENTAL HEALTH UNITS (USE OF FORCE) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Steve Reed, supported by Norman Lamb, Mr Charles Walker, Jim Shannon, Keith Vaz, Sarah Jones, Mr David Lammy, Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Marsha De Cordova, Caroline Lucas, Clive Lewis and Heidi Allen, presented a Bill to make provision about the oversight and management of the appropriate use of force in relation to people in mental health units and similar institutions; to make provision about the use of body cameras by police officers in the course of duties in relation to people in mental health units; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 November, and to be printed (Bill 8).

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Afzal Khan, supported by Joanna Cherry, Hannah Bardell, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Liz Saville Roberts, Lady Hermon and Caroline Lucas, presented a Bill to amend the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 to make provision about the number and size of parliamentary constituencies in the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December, and to be printed (Bill 9).

HOMES (FITNESS FOR HUMAN HABITATION AND LIABILITY FOR HOUSING STANDARDS) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Ms Karen Buck, supported by Luciana Berger, Jess Phillips, Matthew Pennycook, Shabana Mahmood, Heidi Allen, Marsha De Cordova, Andy Slaughter, Alex Sobel, Kate Green, Diana Johnson and Clive Efford, presented a Bill to amend the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 to require that residential rented accommodation is provided and maintained in a state of fitness for human habitation; to amend the Building Act 1984 to make provision about the liability for works on residential accommodation that do not comply with Building Regulations; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 10).

Mr Speaker: Friday 19 January is a splendid day—it is my birthday.

CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS, MARRIAGES AND DEATHS (REGISTRATION ETC.) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Tim Loughton, supported by Mr Graham Brady, Dame Caroline Spelman, Mrs Anne Main, Frank Field, Heidi Allen, Caroline Lucas and Antoinette Sandbach, presented a Bill to provide that opposite sex couples may enter a civil partnership; to make provision about the registration of the names of the mother of each party to a marriage or civil partnership; to make provision about the registration of stillborn deaths; to give coroners the power to investigate stillborn deaths; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 11).

ORGAN DONATION (DEEMED CONSENT) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Geoffrey Robinson, supported by Paul Flynn, Sir Vince Cable, Caroline Lucas, Michael Fabricant, Liz Saville Roberts, Dr Philippa Whitford, Kate Green, Sir Oliver Letwin, Jim Shannon, Angela Rayner and Crispin Blunt, presented a Bill to enable persons in England to withhold consent for organ donation and transplantation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 12).

REFUGEES (FAMILY REUNION) (NO. 2) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Angus Brendan MacNeil, supported by Stephen Twigg, Robert Neill, Stuart C. McDonald, Tulip Siddiq, Tim Farron, Jim Shannon, Caroline Lucas, Anna Soubry, Ian Blackford, Stella Creasy and Hywel Williams, presented a Bill to make provision for leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom to be granted to the family members of refugees and of people granted humanitarian protection; to provide for legal aid to be made available for such family reunion cases; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March 2018, and to be printed (Bill 13).

PARENTAL BEREAVEMENT (LEAVE AND PAY) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Kevin Hollinrake, supported by Will Quince, Sir Nicholas Soames, Craig Tracey, Carolyn Harris, Antoinette Sandbach, Jeremy Quin, Huw Merriman, Victoria Prentis, Diana Johnson and Rebecca Pow, presented a Bill to make provision about leave and pay for employees whose children have died.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 October, and to be printed (Bill 14).

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EDUCATION) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Vicky Foxcroft, on behalf of Jim McMahon, supported by Jeremy Corbyn, Tom Watson, Peter Kyle, Diana Johnson, Lucy Powell, Sir Peter Bottomley, Stephen Gethins, Jo Swinson, Jonathan Edwards and Caroline Lucas, presented a Bill to reduce the voting age to 16 in parliamentary and other elections; to make provision about young people's education in citizenship and the constitution; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 November, and to be printed (Bill 15).

OVERSEAS ELECTORS BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Glyn Davies presented a Bill to make provision extending the basis on which British citizens outside the UK qualify to participate in parliamentary elections; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 16).

PARKING (CODE OF PRACTICE) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Sir Greg Knight, supported by Kevin Brennan, Pete Wishart, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, Daniel Zeichner and Graham Jones, presented a Bill to make provision for

and in connection with a code of practice containing guidance about the operation and management of private parking facilities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 17).

Mr Speaker: I think the nation should be aware that, perhaps because the right hon. Gentleman's Bill relates to parking, he is sporting a notably colourful tie, which features a very large number of cars. Knowing his penchant, I assume that they are classic cars.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): They are, indeed.

UNPAID TRIAL WORK PERIODS (PROHIBITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Stewart Malcolm McDonald, supported by Ian Murray, Lady Hermon, Caroline Lucas, Christine Jardine, Patricia Gibson, David Linden, Alison Thewliss, Chris Stephens, Patrick Grady, Carol Monaghan and Martin Whitfield, presented a Bill to prohibit unpaid trial work periods in certain circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 March 2018, and to be printed (Bill 18).

PRISONS (INTERFERENCE WITH WIRELESS TELEGRAPHY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Esther McVey, supported by Andrew Selous, David T. C. Davies, Kirstene Hair, Trudy Harrison, Philip Davies, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, Mr Christopher Chope, Paul Farrelly, Mr Kevan Jones, Mr Stephen Hepburn and Sir Edward Davey, presented a Bill to make provision about interference with wireless telegraphy in prisons and similar institutions.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 December, and to be printed (Bill 19).

STALKING PROTECTION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Sarah Wollaston, supported by Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Ms Harriet Harman, Alex Chalk, Antoinette Sandbach, Luciana Berger, Richard Graham, Victoria Prentis, Maria Caulfield, Mims Davies, Jess Phillips and Vicky Ford, presented a Bill to make provision for protecting persons from risks associated with stalking; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018, and to be printed (Bill 20).

Mr Speaker: Friday 19 January—I do hope I am here.

EMPLOYMENT AND WORKERS' RIGHTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Stephanie Peacock, supported by Louise Haigh, Rachel Reeves, Dan Jarvis, Ellie Reeves, Clive Lewis, Lisa Nandy, Jo Stevens, Ian Mearns, Mike Amesbury, Laura Smith and Chris Stephens, presented a Bill to make provision about employment conditions and workers' rights; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 April 2018, and to be printed (Bill 21).

LICENSING OF TAXIS AND PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLES (SAFEGUARDING AND ROAD SAFETY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daniel Zeichner presented a Bill to make provision about the exercise of taxi and private hire vehicle licensing functions in relation to persons about whom there are safeguarding or road safety concerns; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2018, and to be printed (Bill 22).

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (EXTENSION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Andy Slaughter, supported by Dan Jarvis, Jo Stevens, David Hanson, Ian C. Lucas, Ruth Cadbury, Christian Matheson, Clive Efford, Stephen Timms, Ms Karen Buck, Louise Haigh and Kate Green, presented a Bill to make providers of social housing, local safeguarding children boards, Electoral Registration Officers, Returning Officers and the Housing Ombudsman public authorities for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act 2000; to make information held by persons contracting with public authorities subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000; to extend the powers of the Information Commissioner; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 June 2018, and to be printed (Bill 23).

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCHISEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Peter Kyle, supported by Nicky Morgan, Norman Lamb, Sir Peter Bottomley, Rachel Reeves, Ruth Smeeth, Wes Streeting, Anna Turley, Holly Lynch, Conor McGinn, Caroline Lucas and Jim McMahon, presented a Bill to reduce the voting age to 16 in parliamentary and other elections; to make provision for auto-enrolment onto the electoral register for people aged 16 to 24; to make provision about the use of educational establishments as polling stations; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018, and to be printed (Bill 24).

PHYSICIAN ASSOCIATES (REGULATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Anne Marie Morris presented a Bill to make provision for the regulation of physician associates; to make physician associate a protected title; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October 2018, and to be printed (Bill 25).

NATIONAL LIVING WAGE (EXTENSION TO YOUNG PEOPLE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Holly Lynch, supported by Chris Bryant, Jo Stevens, Anna Turley, Wes Streeting, Jess Phillips, Tulip Siddiq, Ruth Smeeth, Gareth Snell, Conor McGinn, Naz Shah and Graham Jones, presented a Bill to extend the National Living Wage to people aged 18 to 24.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 July 2018, and to be printed (Bill 26).

Mr Speaker: I thank colleagues for their patience.

Tuition Fees

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

2.37 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government's decision to increase tuition fees implemented by the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1205) and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1206).

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this emergency debate. It is a shame that it has been necessary when we have a First Secretary of State who called for a national debate on tuition fees, a Brexit Secretary who says that this House always votes on statutory instruments and a Justice Secretary who, when Leader of the House, actually accepted the need for a debate and a vote. Of course, that was before the election; 100 days later, this weak and wobbly Government do not even trust their own Back Benchers with a vote on their own policies.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which the Education Secretary and the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation took through this House, is very clear on the matter. Paragraph 5 of schedule 2 states that the upper limit of fees can rise only when

"each House of Parliament has passed a resolution that, with effect from a date specified in the resolution, the higher amount should be increased".

Will the Minister guarantee that no students will have to pay the higher fees until both Houses have passed such a resolution allowing it, and will he tell us when the votes on these resolutions will take place?

The Minister seems to be one member of the Government who does not want this vote, judging from his Twitter feed last night. He said that plans to raise fees were first outlined in July 2016, and that we have since had extensive debate. Perhaps he forgot that the plans were announced on the last day before summer recess last year, and were snuck out as one of 30 written statements on that day. The statutory instrument was then put before the House just before Christmas last year. Not long after that, the Opposition prayed against the measures, yet despite repeatedly pushing for it we were not given a debate. As the Minister said, the regulations came into force on 6 January.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the subject of being weak and wobbly, will the hon. Lady confirm whether it is still Labour policy to pay off all £100 billion of the outstanding student debt—yes or no?

Angela Rayner: I do not know how many times I have to explain this to Conservative Members before they finally understand. A cynic might say that they are wilfully misrepresenting my party's policy. We have never said that we would simply write off all existing debt. Conservative Members refer to comments made by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, and I remind them that he said we would look at steps to reduce or ameliorate the debt burden. Perhaps that confused Conservative Members, because their Front Benchers have not done that in seven years. For instance—

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: Conservative Members may want to listen to this before they intervene. For instance, we would look again at the repayment threshold for student debts; the Government have frozen it at £21,000, which will cost lower-earning graduates the most. We would look at the interest rates on debt, which the Government have allowed to reach an extortionate, unacceptable 6.1% for the year to come. I have said it once and I will say it again: we have no plans to write off existing student debt and we never promised to do so. Unlike the Conservative party, we made sure that all our plans were fully costed and outlined in our manifesto. Perhaps it could learn something from that.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In 2010 the Government tripled tuition fees and then slashed the education maintenance allowance. In 2015 they took grants from students and now they are raising fees again. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is no surprise whatsoever that young people are turning away in their droves from this Government?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. Conservative Members have a sour-grapes attitude because they clearly understand that, unlike them, we have connected with the young people of this country.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I wonder if the hon. Lady could put to one side the script she was given seconds before she got up and answer this very simple question. During the election, her party made it categorically clear to endless numbers of students that it would abolish the student debt. Will she now get up and apologise for using them as election fodder?

Angela Rayner: As I said to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), that was not—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must calm down. Earlier we were blessed with the presence of the Father of the House, who asked a question at Prime Minister's questions. The rest of the time, he exuded a Buddha-like calm, which other right hon. and hon. Members should seek to emulate. I deliberately granted this debate the full three hours, so there is plenty of time, but Members should not shout at each other across the Chamber.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) seems to have failed to understand our policy, which was absolutely clear: we would abolish tuition fees from the day we took office—*[Interruption.]* Please listen to my answers. That was absolutely clear. We said that we would abolish tuition fees from the moment we got into power. We also said that we would bring back maintenance grants. Unlike Conservative Members, who are chuntering away and not listening to what I have to say in response to their interventions—

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I am not taking any more interventions if Conservative Members are not prepared to listen to the answers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I suggest to my hon. Friend that she does not take any nonsense from Government Members? They repeatedly told this House that whenever the Opposition prayed against a statutory instrument, they would guarantee a vote in this House so that people could put their vote where their mouth was, but they have repeatedly failed to do that. They are trying to do this by the back door, which is why she is absolutely right to show them the door.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I congratulate him on having more experience than I do of such matters.

Several hon. Members rose—

Angela Rayner: I am going to make some progress.

The Minister said that the regulations came into force on 6 January, but they did so without debate, let alone a vote in this House. Then, when we were finally granted a debate and a vote, the Prime Minister called her early election and the regulations came into force while Parliament was dissolved. We have since raised the issue repeatedly, only to be told, eventually, by the new Leader of the House that the Government do not intend to provide any time for it. So much for the Minister’s “extensive debate”.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I promise the hon. Lady that I will listen intently to her reply. She and I will agree, I am sure, on one thing: this country is very lucky to have people with high-quality brain power at university today. They have told me and my Conservative colleagues what they thought her party leader said during the election campaign, and it is at huge variance with what the hon. Lady claims he said. Nobody remembers the weasel words and caveats that she has deployed today. Will she now apologise?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman calls them weasel words, but I can guarantee him that before and throughout the general election campaign I travelled up and down the country with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and we were absolutely clear on this. Many students—

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. Members have really got to learn the ropes and the hon. Gentleman has been here a number of years. It is normal manners and parliamentary etiquette that a Member be given the chance to respond to an intervention before being hollered at to take another. It is not a laughing matter, Mr Jenrick.

Robert Jenrick: I wasn’t laughing.

Mr Speaker: You were—you were smirking. Don’t smirk at me. I am telling you what the situation is and you can accept it, whether you like it or not. Behave.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I believe that our party was absolutely clear on the matter. The thousands of students who have contacted me are clear on it as well, so I do not know why the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) is not.

The consequence, of course, is uncertainty both for universities and for thousands of students due to go to university next year. Perhaps the Minister will tell us what will happen if, once we eventually secure a vote, the regulations are revoked during the university year. This fees hike is damaging enough in itself, but leaving it unclear is even worse.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s response to this debate is extraordinary? They are mocking the issues when they should be much more concerned about the recently published drop in university application figures and the rising debt of young people. Parents and grandparents have told me of debts of about £50,000 for young people and their families. Should we not be sending a message of hope to young people, not saying that we will increase their anxiety before they even start on life?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This was a really hot topic during the general election. I believe that the Opposition have the best interests of young people at heart, and the Government really need to listen to where the population are on this particular issue.

The current plans are all part of a pattern of behaviour from this Government. They tripled tuition fees to £9,000. They abolished maintenance grants for students, meaning that the poorest students will take on the most debt. They promised, when they tripled tuition fees, that the threshold at which graduates repay their student debts—it is currently £21,000—would rise in line with earnings. In fact, the then Universities Minister said:

“We will increase the repayment threshold to £21,000, and will thereafter increase it periodically to reflect earnings.”—[Official Report, 3 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 924.]

They broke that promise as well. While tuition fees continue to rise, the repayment threshold remains frozen, hitting graduates on lower salaries each and every year.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady refers to broken promises. Will she tell us which party stated in 2001 that it would not introduce top-up fees because it had legislated against them, and then introduced them in 2004?

Angela Rayner: The hon. and learned Lady will know that when we introduced tuition fees and dealt with that issue, we invested considerably and increased the amount of maintenance grants and support on offer to poorer students. Recently, even Lord Adonis, the architect of those tuition fees, called fees a

“Frankenstein’s monster of £50,000-plus debts for graduates on modest salaries who can’t remotely afford to pay back these sums while starting families”.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I was in Parliament at the time when that Bill went through, protesting against it. Not only has our noble Friend Lord Adonis had a change of heart; so has the entire Conservative party, because it railed against the introduction of top-up fees. George Osborne called it a “tax on learning”. Who would have thought that only a few years later, it would be the Conservative party that plunged students into the highest levels of debt in the western world?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am really trying to make this debate constructive, instead of ping-ponging who said what. It should be about what the young people and students of today expect of us. They are telling us that the current debt levels are unsustainable, and they clearly are unsustainable.

Conservative Members say all the time that a record number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university. If only that was the whole story. The evidence shows that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely to be deterred by debt.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that something different is happening in Wales, with the implementation of the Diamond review? It is moving back to a grant-based system, so the vast majority of students will receive a full grant and support for living costs, which is something that the National Union of Students and various other student union bodies have called for. That shows that there can be a different way. That is the difference between having a Labour Government in Wales and a Tory Government in England.

Angela Rayner: I am sure that my hon. Friend will have pre-empted some of the interventions from Conservative Members, who like to say that the Welsh Government are not doing things right. Of course, the Welsh Government have invested in their young people. They believe that their young people are the future of the Welsh economy. I congratulate them on making those decisions. Of course, the Welsh Government make decisions about education—before I get an intervention about what Wales is doing about loans.

As I was saying, burdening students with more than £50,000 of debt means that we will see more disadvantaged young people not going to university. After all, we have seen that at many of the most prestigious universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, the number of disadvantaged students is falling.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The hon. Lady complains that we keep asking questions about who said what and when. The trouble is that the Opposition perpetrated a scam on the British people. They clearly led students in our constituencies to believe that their loans would be written off. If she is now saying that that was not the intention, but that they would just cancel future tuition fees, how is it fair to those people, including my children, who have notched up tens of thousands of pounds of debt, which she is complaining about, that she leaves them with a debt when future students will not have a debt? What is fair about that?

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I cannot really say it any more clearly than we have said it. We said we would look at that, but that we would not do anything with it unless we could afford it.

I have put forward and will continue to put forward three things that the Government could do right away to help our students, including the hon. Gentleman's family members. First, the Government have decided to freeze the repayment threshold, which they do not have to do. They could put it in line with earnings. Secondly,

they could look at the percentage rate of the loans. It is 6.1%, but it does not have to be that much. It was the Bank of England rate plus 1%, which would now be 1.25%—considerably lower than the current 6.1%. Lastly, if the Government really care about social mobility and getting students into university, let them bring back maintenance grants.

Ms Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I was a nurse until a month ago. I was not even adequately paid, let alone overpaid. I got a bursary when I trained. I was a single parent and I could not have trained without it. The fact that nursing applications have fallen by 23% since the Government took away bursaries means that people like me will not be able to train. What are my hon. Friend's comments on that?

Angela Rayner: I welcome my hon. Friend to this place. She makes an extremely important point. Ending nursing bursaries has had a negative impact on people applying to go to university to do nursing courses. As we look to exit the European Union, Members on both sides of the House know that we have to train and skill up our own workforce in order to provide all the nurses, doctors and other skilled workers we require. Conservative Members said during the general election campaign that they wanted to cut immigration. If they truly want to do that, they have to invest in young people in this country.

It seems that the Secretary of State believes that access to higher education simply ends with admissions. Figures from the Office for Fair Access show that the proportion of students dropping out before they finish their studies is at a five-year high. Disadvantaged students are nearly twice as likely to drop out than their more affluent peers.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I appreciate that this is a difficult day for the hon. Lady because she has come to raise some important issues, which we should debate, but her credibility is completely undermined by the difficulty of her saying that she speaks in the best interests of young people on the one hand, while on the other hand her party's policy has changed to a position where today she says she has no plans to write off student debt. Therefore, her party's word cannot be trusted on anything and young people will become more cynical about what politicians say.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are talking about the tuition fee rise that his party said it would not impose on students and that it is trying to deny us a vote on. I hope he will push his Government to ensure that we do get a vote and that he will vote with us not to hike up tuition fees for young people.

Social mobility is stalling and drop-out rates are rising. Student debt in the UK is the highest in the world and more than 75% of students will never pay off their debts. The fact is that the Government's policy on higher education simply is not working.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): My position on tuition fees is perfectly clear, as my voting record in this Chamber will attest. The difference in what the hon. Lady has outlined today is that the normal run of things with Labour policy is to promise students something and backtrack when in government; this time, Labour has promised to write off students' debts and then

[*Andrew Percy*]

backtracked in opposition. Will she therefore apologise to the grandfather in my constituency who simply got his information from the news and wrote to me to tell me that he was going to vote Labour so that his children's debts would be written off? If not, is she accusing him of being a bit stupid?

Angela Rayner: What I promise I will do for any of the hon. Members in this Chamber and any of their constituents who potentially were misguided is ask them to refer to our website, where they can get a copy of "For the many not the few", which highlights our national education service. That is a huge number of pages longer than the policy in the Conservative manifesto, which was, quite frankly, to take the food from children's mouths. That was rejected by the people of this country quite outstandingly.

There is an alternative—one that was outlined by the Labour party at the last general election. We pledged to end university tuition fees so that future generations will not be burdened with debt simply for seeking an education. We would fund that by taxing only the wealthiest individuals and the biggest businesses, rather than forcing only those graduates unfortunate enough to be £50,000 in debt to foot the bill. By contrast, the Government's system will still cost the taxpayer nearly £6 billion a year in the long term. We would also bring back student maintenance grants to support students from low and middle-income backgrounds with their living costs, reversing one of the Government's most regressive decisions.

There is someone in the Conservative party who for a long time agreed with that policy. There was a Tory shadow Education Secretary who said that the removal of the maintenance grant would "far from widening access, narrow it."

She told her party that it needed to

"show we care about the student who wants to go to university, but can't afford tuition fees."

She then helped to write, and stood on, a manifesto that would have scrapped tuition fees altogether. She is now the Prime Minister. But she is now the one narrowing access, not widening it. She is showing students that she does not care, and is hoping that her manifesto promises can be disposed of as quickly as Nick and Fiona were.

To think that on Monday the Secretary of State accused me of peddling "snake oil propaganda". I guess that is her specialist subject. She promised to protect school budgets in her manifesto in 2015 before cutting them in real terms. She pledged to give 30 hours of free childcare to working parents only to tell tens of thousands of them that they do not earn enough to be eligible. Now she is breaking every single promise the Conservative party has made to students.

I have told the Secretary of State again and again what could be done to address the existing debt burden. I repeat that she could look again at the extortionate interest rates on students, due to rise to more than 6% at a time when the Bank of England base rate is 0.25%. She could keep the promise originally made to students to raise the repayment threshold on their debt in line with average earnings. She could look again at the unacceptable levels of disadvantaged students dropping out of university, and give them proper maintenance support.

All of those things would reduce the burden of debt on today's graduates, and most of them would not cost the taxpayer an extra penny. The 2015 general election feels like a long time ago, but I remember a time when the Conservatives stood on a manifesto that said that "we as a nation should not be piling up and passing on unaffordable levels of debt to the next generation."

But that is exactly what the Government are doing. Increasing tuition fees again will simply leave more and more young people with debts they will never repay. Labour believes that is the wrong thing to do. Conservative Members may disagree, and that is their right, but what is not right is to deny this House the chance to decide.

Tuition fees are an important issue, but they are not the main issue before us today. The question before us today is much more fundamental. It is about trust in our Government and ultimately our democracy. Frankly, if Ministers cannot keep their promises to us, why should anyone else believe them?

James Cartlidge: On a point of order—

Mr Speaker: I hope that this is a point of order, rather than a point of frustration.

James Cartlidge: The point of order is that the Leader of the Opposition said to the *NME*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. It was a nice try, and he is an industrious fellow, but that is a matter of debate. He cannot ask the Chair to adjudicate on who said what when, especially when it was outside the Chamber. I appreciate his assiduity, but he needs a rather better disguise than that.

Angela Rayner: I am sure the Minister is about to make what he believes is a convincing case. However, the real test is not to give us his words, but to give us a vote on them. That is the question I put to him now. If he is so convinced that what he is doing is right, will he have the courage of those convictions and put them to the House?

3.4 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Labour party wants to talk about process because its policy platform is disintegrating before our eyes. I welcome the opportunity to set out once again the Government's approach to the student fees regulations. This is hardly new terrain for Parliament. The Government made it clear as far back as the Budget in June 2015 that maximum tuition fees would rise in line with inflation, and I set out changes to fees in detail for 2017-18 in a written ministerial statement in July 2016. Changes to fees were subsequently extensively debated during the passage through both Houses of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, with numerous votes on student finance issues that were all won by the Government.

The regulations are not "proposed" as the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) suggested: they have been in force for six months. This debate, which cannot change arrangements for 2017-18, is therefore a sham exercise. I suspect that this is simply more of the same cynical politics we saw over the weekend, when Labour broke its own pre-election pledge—about which we have heard so much this afternoon—to write off historic student loan debts.

Let us recall precisely what the Leader of the Opposition told the *NME* seven days before the general election. He said:

“I don’t see why those that had the historical misfortune to be at university during the £9,000 period should be burdened excessively compared to those that went before or those that come after. I will deal with it.”

That was a clear pledge to young voters. The first sign of trouble came when the shadow Education Secretary said a few days ago that she was still trying to work out the costs of that policy on a big abacus. The penny dropped completely over the weekend when we heard from the shadow Chancellor and others that that pre-election promise was being downgraded to the lowly status of an ambition. We all know what that means. It means that it is never ever going to happen. It does not do anything for the credibility of the Labour party to abandon such a striking commitment to young people just a few weeks after the general election.

Simon Hoare: I may be becoming a little forgetful, but was the manifesto to which my hon. Friend just referred the “fully costed” manifesto from the Labour party?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend has exposed the truth, which is that the Labour party is delivering what is perhaps the biggest act of political deception we have seen in decades. It is the old game of bait and switch, saying one thing before a general election and another thing immediately after. Of course, given that this would be a £100 billion hit to our public finances, which would hurt hard-working taxpayers across the country and deliver a significant addition to our national debt and the interest burdens of the next generation, I am glad that the Labour party has done this spectacular and embarrassing U-turn. I suspect that it will not be too long before it abandons the rest of its unaffordable, unfunded and fantastical policy platform. It is a programme that it has clearly taken wholesale from the statist playbooks of 1970s tax-and-spend regimes that all ended up needing the International Monetary Fund to step in.

The policy that Labour proposed before the general election would have increased our national debt by a whole five percentage points of GDP, adding no less than £3,500 to the debt carried by every household in the country.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): At what point does my hon. Friend think the hon. Lady decided to make that U-turn? Can he enlighten the House on that? It seems a real puzzle.

Joseph Johnson: I suspect that the Opposition decided to do that spectacular U-turn when they realised what impact it would have on hard-working taxpayers up and down the country. As I have said, the proposal to write off student debt will add £3,500 to the debt carried by every household in the country.

Ms Karen Lee: The decision to scrap the maintenance grant means that the most disadvantaged students will graduate with the highest level of debt. Does the Minister think that is fair?

Joseph Johnson: A better way of looking at it is that the Government are making the most resources available to the people who are most in need of them. We want

people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university. We are delighted that they are doing so in record numbers, and that they are now 43% more likely to do so than they ever were before.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If we were to put the best possible gloss on what the Leader of the Opposition said, and imagine that he was merely misunderstood in his intentions by students when he said that he would “deal with it”, what faith can we put in the new language that is being used? It is now being said that the Opposition will merely “look at” a number of propositions. If we cannot trust what “deal with” means, how can we possibly trust merely “look at”?

Joseph Johnson: That is exactly right. The Opposition’s policy platform is collapsing before our eyes. The inevitable next step is their abandonment of the albatross around their neck that is their policy of abolishing tuition fees in their entirety. They are currently saddled with it. They are trying to wriggle off the hook of their clear promise to abolish student debt, and they will soon be trying to get rid of that appalling albatross of getting rid of tuition fees in total. As I have said, abolishing student debt would mean a huge addition to our net debt. The proposal to abolish tuition fees and reinstate maintenance grants would add £12 billion to the national deficit, which is equivalent to 0.7% of GDP and to an additional 2.5p on the basic rate of income tax.

Chris Bryant: Let me make a very simple procedural point to the Minister. If the Government want to make dramatic changes in schemes, they should take those changes through the House fairly and properly so that Members can vote on them. Ministers have said repeatedly in the House that if the Opposition pray against a statutory instrument, including those that are relevant in this case, there will be a vote. That promise has not been fulfilled. Will the Minister make it again now?

Joseph Johnson: As I said in my opening remarks, we have had lots of votes on student finance issues, and we won them all. [HON. MEMBERS: “What about the statutory instrument?”] The statutory instrument in question has been in force for six months. It went through all the parliamentary processes. Labour Members had plenty of opportunity to push for votes at the correct time; they are now six months too late.

When we reformed student finance in 2011, we put in place a system designed to make higher education accessible to all. Students are now supported by a system of Government-subsidised loans, which are repayable only when borrowers are earning more than £21,000 a year. Controlling the cost of higher education to the general taxpayer who has to fund public spending in this way allowed us, critically, to remove the cap on student numbers and ensure that higher education was available to all with the potential to benefit from it.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister rightly points out that funding higher education will involve a cost to the public purse. His own Government will be aware that 45% of all loans that are taken out are never repaid, and that after the 30-year rule period has elapsed, 70% of students have a debt outstanding. Has he worked out the figures to establish whether that money, which the Government

[*Gareth Snell*]

must ultimately pay off, could be better used to reduce the cost of tuition fees up front so that more students could go to university?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman is correct in saying that there is a Government contribution towards the loan book. It is a conscious, deliberate Government subsidy towards the skills base of the country, and towards giving more people from disadvantaged backgrounds a chance to go to university with finance being absolutely no barrier. We want people to pursue worthwhile, socially valuable careers that may not lead to high earnings—careers in social work, for instance—and we also want people to be able to take on childbearing and family-rearing responsibilities. Those are all reasons why the state will continue to make a contribution towards the cost of the loan book.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joseph Johnson: I have already given way a number of times, and I am now going to make some progress.

The move to a predominantly loan-based system has enabled us to increase the level of financial support available to disadvantaged students. I am pleased to say that the application rate for 18-year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds is at an all-time high. We have also seen record numbers of black and minority-ethnic students going into higher education in recent years. There is more to be done, but we are making progress. The effectiveness of our system and our reforms has been recognised by the OECD. In September 2016, its head of education, Andreas Schleicher, said

“the UK has been able to meet rising demand for tertiary education with more resources...by finding effective ways to share the costs and benefits”.

The Government remain committed to providing a fair deal for students and ensuring that England’s universities are sustainably and properly financed. That has enabled them to maintain their world-class standing, with funding per student per degree up 25% as a result of our changes.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): There are two great universities in my constituency, and they are both telling me that they face huge uncertainty because of Brexit, not least because they do not know their own fee arrangements for EU students. They are worried about not attracting those students. What is the Minister doing about that, if he wants to ensure that they are well funded for the future?

Joseph Johnson: We have provided significant clarity in that respect. EU students will continue to be eligible for access to student support in 2016-17, 2017-18 and 2018-19. We have provided the clarity that they need. They know that for the duration of their studies they will be able to come here, access home fee status and access student support.

The £9,000 fee cap that we set in 2012 is now worth £8,500 in real terms. If we leave it unchanged, it will be worth just £8,000 by the end of this Parliament. We simply cannot let that happen, as it would inevitably put the quality of teaching in our universities at risk and undermine the financial sustainability of the sector.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I chair the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Before tuition fees were trebled in 2012, the Committee held a session during which it interviewed the then Secretary of State for Education. He said—I quote from the report—

“When the Government’s economic policies have produced the successful outcome that we all expect, we can return to the question of how universities can be supported in a more generous way, but at the moment we face a massive financial crisis.”

The current proposals are actually less generous, not more generous. Are we still experiencing a financial crisis? If not, when will the present Minister and the current Government live up to the commitment given by that Minister?

Joseph Johnson: I am puzzled by that intervention. Our per-university, per-student funding has risen by 25% as a result of our reforms. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to read the report published last week by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, he will see that, on a per-student basis, our universities, per degree, are better funded than they have been at any point during the past 30 years.

James Cartlidge: May I pursue the logic of that point? Is it not the case that if these fee increases do not take place, we will effectively be cutting spending on universities? Should we not be fighting cuts and opposing Labour’s plan to cut spending on higher education?

Joseph Johnson: Indeed. Our system of student finance is enabling our universities to be funded sustainably. As I have said, per-student, per-degree funding is up by 25%, but we will put all that at risk if we move anywhere near Labour’s policy platform.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Is it not true that Labour Members are now feigning confusion over parliamentary process on this, having previously deliberately created their own confusion? The reality on the doorsteps across Eastleigh was that Labour’s promise to deal with tuition fees included the possibility of covering bank overdrafts. Does the Minister agree that this is an empty promise from a mathematically illiterate party? People felt bank overdrafts, as well as student loans, were being dealt with.

Joseph Johnson: That goes to show the extent to which the Labour party misled the country in the run-up to the general election, and I think my hon. Friend’s constituents are owed an apology.

Let us not forget that it was a Labour Government under Prime Minister Tony Blair who sensibly put in place these legal powers, which we used some six months ago, to uprate fees in line with inflation through a negative procedure. However, under the regulations we are debating today, rather than increasing fees for everyone, we are only allowing providers to maintain their fees in line with inflation if they can demonstrate that they are using these resources well in terms of providing high-quality teaching and good outcomes for their students. Universities UK and GuildHE, the two main representative bodies that collectively represent over 170 higher education providers, have made it clear that allowing the value of fees to be maintained in real terms is essential if our providers are to continue to deliver high-quality teaching. Gordon McKenzie, the chief executive of GuildHE, made it clear that

“fees had to rise by inflation at some point and it was fairer for students if those rises were linked to an assessment of quality”, as the Government are doing.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): University education is also a route to higher earnings, worth up to a quarter of a million pounds over a lifetime. If we go forward with Labour’s policy to abolish tuition fees, it would have a damaging effect on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as we have seen in Scotland, where there is a fall in the number of people from disadvantaged communities applying to university.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Labour’s policies would do the opposite of what it says they would do; they would represent a huge step backwards for social mobility in this country, they would be bad for taxpayers, who would be left shouldering the entire cost of the higher education system, and they would leave the finances of our university system in tatters.

As Professor Steve Smith, vice-chancellor of Exeter University, has said:

“The Teaching Excellence Framework presents us with an opportunity to invest in our students’ futures and the long-term economic success of our country, and to be recognised for outstanding teaching at the same time...The Government rightly wants ‘something for something’, for the economy and for students.”

Wes Streeting: I am shocked that vice-chancellors want tuition fees to rise—this comes as a complete surprise to everyone!

Vice-chancellors want fees to rise every year. Surely the Minister will be able to confirm today that tomorrow he is very likely to use powers to once again increase tuition fees to a higher level, and that once we get to 2019-20, under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, passed just before the general election, we are going to have to have votes in Parliament in order to allow and facilitate fees rises. If we are going to be doing that in the future, why not do it now?

Joseph Johnson: As I have already made clear on a number of occasions, these regulations have been in force for the last six months; they are already law—they are already applying across the sector.

Widening participation is an important policy objective for this Government. Alongside incentivising improvements in teaching, the Government’s policies on student fees have also allowed us to lift the student number cap. This is allowing more people than ever before to benefit from a university education. As I said, disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now 43% more likely to go to university than in 2009, and 52% more likely to go to a high-tariff institution. For the last application cycle, the entry rate for 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds is at a record high: 19.5% in 2016, compared with 13.6% in 2009. The application rate and actual number of English 18-year-old applicants is at record level in this entry cycle.

This Government have made it clear that finance should not be a barrier to going to university, which is why we have made more funding available to students. By replacing maintenance grants with loans, we have been able to increase the funding for living costs that some of the most disadvantaged students receive. It is an increase of over 10% in the current academic year, with a further 2.8% increase for 2017-18. We have worked with the Office for Fair Access to encourage universities to do more to help disadvantaged students.

In 2017-18, institutions are expected to spend over £800 million on measures to improve the access and success of disadvantaged students. This is more than double the amount spent in 2009-10.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that our education exports last year exceeded those of our insurance industry, mainly fuelled by the excellence of our universities. If we do not fund them properly, we will not maintain world-class education at our universities.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Sustainable funding of our system is essential for our universities to continue to attract international students from around the world. Moving to the system Labour is advocating would leave their finances in tatters and be hugely damaging to the quality of teaching they can offer.

Although we are making good progress on widening participation, more can be done, and we are doing more. For example, in the latest guidance given to the Director of Fair Access we acknowledged that selective institutions, including Oxbridge and parts of the Russell Group, already do much to widen access, but we have asked the Director of Fair Access to push much harder to see that more progress is made. In the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, we are strengthening our approach to widening participation by placing an overarching duty on the Office for Students to consider the promotion of equality of opportunity in relation to access and participation in all that it does. The new Director for Fair Access will have a clear role looking across the full student lifecycle.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) has been chuntering about drop-out rates for several minutes. I would like to inform him that drop-out rates are lower now for all students—young, mature, disadvantaged and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds—than when we came into office in 2010, and we are taking all the steps I have just mentioned to ensure they stay among the very lowest in the OECD. The Act also requires individual higher education providers to publish their respective student application, offer, acceptances, drop-out and attainment rates, broken down by gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background, through the transparency duty on the Office for Students. Greater transparency will push universities into further action in this area, to build on what has already been achieved.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that applications from mature students were down by 18% in the last year alone? In 2011-12, applications from part-time students were down by a massive 30%.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I acknowledge the fall, but he needs to understand that there are complex reasons for it, including the rapid increase in the proportion of people entering higher education at the young age of 18. This means that there is a smaller stock of students seeking to participate in part-time and mature study later in life. We also have one of the most buoyant labour markets of any economy anywhere in the world, which increases the opportunity cost of study for people later on in life, at a time when they would otherwise be earning significant sums of money. But we recognise

[Joseph Johnson]

that there is a fall, and we are taking significant steps to address some of the financial barriers that mature students face. That is why from the next academic year we are introducing a part-time maintenance grant on the same basis as the current full-time equivalent grant.

Andrew Percy: On the point about disadvantage, before young people get to university they have to go through the FE system. Will the Minister therefore congratulate North Lincolnshire's Conservative council, which has confirmed this week that its post-16 student bus passes will again be set at £30 for the coming year, down from £200 a year under Labour? Does this not demonstrate once again that, when it comes to students, Labour says one thing when in opposition and does something very different when in power?

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend makes some superb points, and he is a tireless champion of his constituents.

On the repayment of loans, our repayment system offers a fair deal to students. The current student loan system is deliberately subsidised by the taxpayer and is universally accessible to all eligible students, regardless of their personal financial circumstances or credit history. Our repayment system is based on income, not on the amount borrowed. Graduates with post-2012 loans pay back only when they are earning more than £21,000, and then only 9% of earnings above that threshold. After 30 years, all outstanding debts will be written off altogether with no detriment to the borrower, and the Student Loans Company has no recourse to their other assets. The maximum fee cap is being maintained in line with inflation in 2017-18, so it will not be increasing in real terms for anyone going to university. We believe that it is right for those who benefit most from the higher education they receive to contribute to the cost of it. We should not forget that higher education leads to an average net lifetime earnings premium that is comfortably over £100,000.

Labour continues to scaremonger about the changes to higher education. The Conservative-led coalition and this Government have introduced important reforms. The Opposition have promised to write off student debts, to cut tuition fees and to restore maintenance grants. However, they have failed to set out a credible plan on how to fund their promises, and are now shamelessly abandoning them just weeks after the general election. That is hardly surprising, given that they had not even managed to persuade key figures in the Labour party who served in their previous Government. For example, Lord Mandelson described their policy offer as "not credible" and urged Labour to

"be honest about the cost of providing higher education".

Of course, it is not just Lord Mandelson who has commented on this. The former shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, said that his party's failure to identify a sustainable funding mechanism was a "blot on Labour's copybook".

I therefore challenge the Opposition to explain how they would fund their alternative proposals on tuition fees, maintenance grants and the write-off of student debt. We estimate the annual cost of their policy on tuition fees to be £12 billion a year over the next five years of this Parliament. In addition, a one-off expenditure would be required to make good the promise of writing off historical student debt to the tune of £89.3 billion in

cash costs. If Labour wanted to go the whole hog, a further £14 billion would be required to compensate graduates for historical borrowing that they had already repaid.

Make no mistake, Labour's policy of abolishing fees would be a calamity. It would be ruinous for our world-class university sector, leading almost certainly to a fall in per-student funding of the same magnitude we saw in the decades before the introduction of top-up fees—a fall of around 40% in terms of the unit of resource. It would lead to the inevitable re-imposition of student number controls, which would cause the poorest and most disadvantaged to miss out on university, throwing social mobility into reverse. It would do all this at an eye-watering cost to the hard-working general taxpayer, whether he or she had been to university or not. Gone would be the concept of a fair sharing of the costs of university between graduates with higher-than-average lifetime earnings and society at large; taxpayers would foot the entire bill. That would be bad for universities, bad for students and bad for the taxpayer. It is no surprise that in the one place where Labour is in power, it has chosen a different approach. Last week, the Labour Government in Wales quietly increased their tuition fees for 2018-19 to £9,295 a year, making them marginally higher than the current rates in England. Labour in Wales at least knows that the party opposite's plans are unfair to students and ruinous to universities. Perhaps it should tell the Labour party leader.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hope that it is not a point of debate.

Angela Rayner: It is not, Mr Speaker. I did not want to interrupt the Minister earlier, but he claimed that the Opposition had had the chance to call a vote on the statutory instrument and did not do so. Perhaps you could confirm for the record that a prayer was laid against the regulations, and that the Government have simply refused to allow the House a vote on them since then. I understand that the Minister has a particular responsibility not to misinform the House and I therefore ask for this matter to be clarified.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has put me on the spot, but I make no complaint about that. Knowing the Minister as I do, I know him to be a person of integrity, and I would not and am not doubting that for one moment. My recollection—I am open to advice and possibly even scholarly correction from the source from which it usually derives—is that the Opposition had prayed against this set of regulations. My further recollection—I think this is in the *Official Report*—is that the Government had indicated an intention for this matter to be debate and voted upon. It is not always possible to predict the course of events, but I think the commitment was made on 31 March for 19 April. Members will recall, and others will be aware, that on 19 April the House debated a motion to facilitate the calling of an early general election. Thereafter, there was a small amount of business in what we normally call the wash-up session, and then we departed to our constituencies, so there was no debate and vote. That is how I remember it.

It is not desirable for the Chair to be asked to take sides between the parties, and I am not taking sides. I am certainly not taking sides on the merits or demerits

of this issue; the Speaker should not do that. I had thought there was an expectation of a debate and a vote, and that the Opposition had done what was necessary to maximise the chance of such a vote. To be honest, I thought that the Government were open to such a debate and vote, until events overtook. That is history; we are where we are.

As to whether there is to be a substantive vote now, I await the development of events. [*Interruption.*] I am being fed a note. Oh, that is very helpful—and I mean very helpful. It is from one of our senior Clerks and says: “Don’t have the details. Believe you are correct. We can check.” I am very grateful to the Clerk, who is extremely committed to the public service.

3.36 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a fundamental Scottish National party principle that access to education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. SNP MPs have a strong and principled record of opposing tuition fee increases in England and Wales and, if we are able to, we will reject any Bill that would increase the financial burden on students.

In 1997, I personally lobbied my predecessor in this place on the introduction of student fees. I had never met him before, but I think he still remembers that meeting, because I was incensed at the idea that students should have to pay fees. I found their introduction by a Labour Government particularly objectionable, especially as so many of them had gone to university themselves; they then pulled up the ladder behind them. Neither I nor the SNP have changed our view that access to education must be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

The SNP’s commitment to free tuition is firm and unequivocal. In 2007, the SNP Scottish Government abolished tuition fees. The Scottish Government’s free tuition policy benefits 120,000 undergraduate students in Scotland every year, saving them from accruing debts of up to £27,000, unlike their peers in other parts of the UK. The SNP will always guarantee that access to education is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay.

Since we came to office in Scotland, the number of Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants has risen by 12%, but this is also about our values and the kind of Scotland we want to live in. Scotland as whole values free access to higher education, as does the SNP. Unlike the Tories in Scotland, we have no intention of billing our young people for their education, either up front or after they have graduated.

In 2015, the president of the National Union of Students Scotland, Vronnie Sandlan, said:

“The idea that abolishing free education—a clear recognition of the public and social good provided by higher education—would improve fair access seems bizarre.”

It is almost as bizarre as the recent comments by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on “The Andrew Marr Show”, when he said that only graduates benefit from their studies. As a Scot, has he not heard of the commonweal? Everyone benefits. Society benefits from a higher tax take, and from its teachers, its doctors, even its lawyers, and sometimes, perhaps, its MPs.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Has the hon. Lady read the report by the Sutton Trust, the social mobility

charity, which was absolutely damning about social mobility in Scotland as a specific result of the SNP’s policy of capping places? Does she not deprecate the fact that social mobility in Scotland is going into reverse?

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I totally disagree with him. I will come on to that point further on in my speech. The fact is that Scottish education is different; the way into it and how to progress in it are completely untypical.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my frustration at the blatant gaslighting that is going on, once again, around the number of young people in Scotland from disadvantaged backgrounds attending university? Does she agree that our young people have many pathways to university? If children coming through further education colleges are included in UCAS figures, there are significantly higher numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Scotland going through to university than in the rest of the UK.

Marion Fellows: As a former further education lecturer, I have personal experience of that. Indeed, I will be disseminating my wisdom on this when I take up my place on the Education Committee; I see that the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is sitting on the Government Back Benches. The point that has been raised is a well-known canard. We cannot measure Scottish education by the same yardstick that we use in England and Wales because it is different.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I have for some time been trying to make the point that things are done slightly differently in Scotland. I once was a Member in another place. The scrutiny of subordinate legislation in Scotland is very thorough indeed, and consideration is given to whether it should be positive, negative or super-affirmative. The heart of the problem is that the instrument to which the parent Act refers is perhaps a little too draconian in the powers that it gives the governing party. The fault may lie with what was originally agreed months ago—this may be what is bedevilling hon. Members—and perhaps the role of the House was not made suitably strong.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and welcome him to his place. Yes, there are many differences, and trying to compare apples and pears just does not work.

Wes Streeting: There are international comparators. The fact is that the SNP Government’s record on education in Scotland is a national disgrace: there are 4,000 fewer teachers, class sizes are up and, of the increased number of students going to university, 10 times more are coming from the wealthiest backgrounds than the poorest backgrounds. The gap is widening, and that is under an SNP Government.

Marion Fellows: If the hon. Gentleman listens to the end of my speech, he will find that I completely refute what he is saying. The facts tell a different story. Larry Flanagan, the general secretary of the Educational

[Marion Fellows]

Institute of Scotland, has said that Scottish education is not in the parlous state that is ascribed to it by other parties. I believe that he is one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues.

Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree university entrants rose 12% in 2006-07. The figure now stands at 28,777, 58% of whom are women. As I have said, the SNP firmly believes that access to university should be based on the ability to learn. To support that, the SNP Government have invested record levels of funding in our universities—£5 billion since 2012-13, with a further £1 billion planned in 2017-18.

The latest UCAS statistics have shown a drop in Scottish-domiciled students applying to higher education institutions, but that is not necessarily a negative. Indeed, it is further evidence that the approach taken in Scotland to ensuring that young people have equal choices and chances to succeed in life is working. For example, the youth unemployment rate has fallen from 14% since 2007 and now stands at 8.4%, and Scotland continues to have among the lowest rates of all the EU countries.

A record proportion of young people from Scotland's most deprived communities are continuing their education, entering training or getting a job after they leave school, with 88.7% of school leavers from these communities going on to a positive initial destination—the highest ever proportion, and up since 2011-12. A record 93.3% of young people are continuing their education, going into training or getting a job—that includes modern apprenticeships—after leaving school. This is a good news story. They do not all want to go to university; many of them want to earn and learn.

According to the Scottish Funding Council, nearly 85% of further education students who achieve a qualification go on to a positive destination such as further study, training or employment. In 2015-16, almost 12,000 more students than in 2008-09 in both further and higher education at college successfully completed full-time courses leading to a recognised qualification. I know about that because I taught in a further education college. People in the most deprived areas of Livingston and West Lothian, where I taught, started in further education colleges at 16, and in some cases at 15. They progressed through college. They did further education for perhaps one or two years—in the same place—and continued on to higher education courses at higher national certificate and higher national diploma level. They were then able to articulate into the second or third year of Scottish university courses. That is how it is done in Scotland.

I was privileged to be part of the educational journey made by these people, some of whom were from the worst areas. I can think of one woman student who got pregnant at 15, had to leave school and came back to university. I interviewed her and saw her potential; she had no formal qualifications, yet she ended up with a degree—and no debt. I think that answers the question of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) about social mobility.

Thanks to free tuition, Scotland is making progress towards achieving the target of 20% of students who enter university coming from the 20% of Scottish communities that are most deprived. There is no doubt about the SNP Government's investment in additional places for access students; my husband was an access

student. He decided to go to university aged 65 and joined the local college, which at that time was called Motherwell College. He took an access programme, did a year at college and gained a place at Glasgow University. He was unable to continue his educational journey for various reasons, but I know many others who have followed the same route. These students go to not only former technical colleges or institutes of technology that have since become universities, but our ancient universities. That is to be cherished and encouraged—and they have no fees.

That is why the Scottish Government continue to invest £51 million a year in supporting approximately 7,000 places. Scotland's universities continue to attract students from around the world, and the number of non-EU international applicants has increased by 6% since last year; that is higher than the 2% increase in the UK as a whole. This is good news for Scotland, and we are keen to welcome those who wish to come to Scotland to live, learn and work.

The Scottish Government are determined to support our valuable higher education sector and are committed to working with our universities to continue to attract the very best students from around the world. The UK Government's failure to provide an offer that goes far enough for EU nationals after Brexit has had a worrying knock-on effect on applications to HEIs in Scotland.

Down here, the Tories are all for front-door fees; back in Scotland, the Tories are all about back-door fees. If Ruth Davidson's Tories had had their way in the 2016 election in Scotland, they would have introduced a £6,000 graduate tax, which would have had to be paid back when graduates earned £20,000. The UK Tories want to stop international students studying in the UK by abolishing the vital post-study work visa, but the Scottish Tories want to deter EU students by threatening them with additional taxes. By contrast, the SNP Scottish Government have pledged to reform student loan repayments: graduates will not pay loan debt until they earn £22,000; the repayment period is reduced to 30 years. If even a wee country like Scotland can do that, so can any other.

Over the past 10 years, the SNP Scottish Government have worked hard to make Scotland the best country it can be. It is no wonder that other parties are now taking their lead from the SNP on tuition fees. Labour and the Tories opposed progressive SNP policies tooth and nail for a decade; now they have changed their minds. The SNP has opposed tuition fees since they were first introduced by Labour in 1997, and scrapped them in 2008. Now Labour has said it will follow our lead in England—imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery.

Average student loan debt in Scotland continues to be the lowest in the UK: £10,500 per student in 2015-16, compared with £24,640—up 2% since 2014-15. By contrast with the UK Government, who abolished maintenance grants entirely for new students in England from the 2016-17 academic year, we raised the income threshold for the maximum bursary from £17,000 to £19,000. That will benefit an additional 2,500 young students and 400 independent students.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Have not further education budgets in Scotland been cut continually, which has led to a reduction of 152,000 young students in Scotland?

Is it not high time to do what the Conservative party manifesto pledged to do, which is to reverse those cuts so that we give our young people a fair chance in life?

Marion Fellows: May I also rebut that canard? When I started teaching in further education in Scotland in 1992, many college courses were not vocational but leisure courses. West Lothian College ran a very successful one on which people my age—now—spent six hours a week doing art. The Scottish Government cut funding for courses like that and increased funding for vocational training. They also do huge programmes in places where there has been a loss of jobs locally, and the first thing the Scottish Government do when they send in a taskforce is include local colleges to provide short-term training courses. More people now leave further education with good qualifications—and that is totally what matters.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: I am sorry, but I would like to continue—I am feeling a little dizzy, to be fair.

The SNP Government are not complacent and are committed to doing more to support students. They want to ensure that support is equitable, in particular for the most vulnerable, which is why the Scottish Government are conducting a comprehensive review of student support under an independent chair and a wide range of membership, from Scotland's colleges to the National Union of Students and other bodies.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: As the hon. Gentleman persists, I will give way.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Lady is generous in giving way. She has talked about the most vulnerable students in Scotland and about being able to work and learn. Can she explain why the Scottish Government receive the apprenticeship levy yet sponsor only a very modest 30,000 apprenticeships, compared with the 3 million awarded in the UK during the last Parliament?

Marion Fellows: Let me say one thing in response to that. The Scottish Government consulted businesses in Scotland; they were already doing good work with businesses, encouraging them to take on modern apprenticeships. Modern apprenticeships were far further advanced. The Scottish Government did not just make decisions for themselves. There was almost an imposition on the Scottish Government because our devolved Parliament deals with issues such as training and education. When the UK Government introduced the new levy for all employers, we consulted those employers and the agreement went forward.

I am not prepared to take any more interventions; I have almost finished.

The terrible decision to introduce fees for nurses and to scrap bursaries in England and Wales is clearly having an impact on nursing application numbers from England; figures show a massive 23% fall on last year. In Scotland, we remain committed to free tuition fees and protecting the non-means-tested, non-repayable nursing and midwifery student bursary, which we believe is essential to ensure a steady supply of trainees into the profession.

Those who want a highly educated workforce should follow Scotland's example. After all, it ranks at the top of the world's statistics, with Canada and Russia: 45% of Scotland's population aged between 25 and 64 are educated to degree level. Will the Minister consider doing what the Scottish Government have done so well? Do not attempt to increase fees for students in England and Wales—abolish them. We have world-class universities too, and what the Scottish Government do works.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Select Committee, Mr Robert Halfon. As we have discussed, the right hon. Gentleman is welcome to speak from a seated position if he wishes.

3.56 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): This is an important debate. I have huge respect for the Minister and all the work he has done to make our university sector better by ensuring that students from all backgrounds have the chance to climb the ladder of opportunity.

In considering student fees, we have a duty of fairness to both the taxpayer and the student, and it is right that taxpayers should not bear the burden alone. A number of principles need to be clear when it comes to tuition fees. The first is that we help students from disadvantaged backgrounds not just get on that ladder of opportunity, but get to the top. The second is that the interest rates charged should be fair for students. The third is value for money. When we talk about disadvantaged backgrounds, we need to be sure that we mean those at the very bottom struggling the most, as well as those who are just about managing.

Earlier this year, we heard that the numbers of working-class students entering the top universities had fallen over the last decade. Although more of our poorest young people are entering university, most are winning places at the lower and middle-ranked institutions rather than those offering the best opportunities for high-earning graduate careers. Disadvantaged graduates will suffer even more acutely than their more affluent peers on graduation, but they will also suffer a class pay gap that means that professional employees from poorer backgrounds are paid almost £7,000 a year less than their peers from more privileged families.

My hon. Friend the Minister spoke powerfully about what he wanted to do to improve the prospects of part-time students, and he recognised that the figures had declined. I welcome that and urge him to do everything possible to support part-time students, particularly single parents on low incomes who may fear going to university because of the size of the loan.

What does value for money mean when it comes to a university education? Why can universities charge the same high fees when there is such variation in the jobs that students find? The Minister has done a lot of work on that and on the new measurements he has introduced, but surely the time has come to look at the level of fees as compared with the destination data. People go to university to climb the ladder of prosperity, and to improve the skills and productivity of our nation. If they pay £9,000-plus and come out with a good job—job done. If they do not come out with a good job, we need to ask why.

James Cartlidge: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent argument, but does it not focus his attention on the repayment threshold? In a sense, a higher threshold enforces the very point he is making. If people get the higher salary, fair enough; they repay their loan. If not, they do not repay it anyway.

Robert Halfon: I have a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend's point.

We need to look carefully at the salaries of the senior management of universities. Something is going wrong if there are significant increases in the salaries of top management but poor destinations for graduates. To be honest, I do not mind what management figures earn if every single person who leaves that university gets a good job at the end. If they do not, I cannot understand why some vice-chancellors receive huge increases in their pay but fail to provide good outcomes. I am not going to name those universities today, but we need to take a hard look at this.

Julian Knight: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful and considered speech. Does he agree that we should also look at the length of university courses? Three years seems a little long for some courses, considering the smaller number of teaching hours.

Robert Halfon: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a point that I will come to, which relates to business rates. This is about not just the length of courses, but the way in which terms are structured. I said at the beginning of my remarks that the burden on the taxpayer needs to be fair, but we also need to ensure that the burden on the student is fair.

A constituent of mine entered university during the first year of £9,000 tuition fees, and her debt is now around £45,000 including the maintenance loan. I am not against student loans. It is not fair for working people in my constituency to bear the full burden of paying for all students to go to university. However, value for money also involves interest rates. Interest rate levels are much lower in the United States and, as I understand it, there are quite a few months in the year when students have more opportunities to work so they can pay back their loans. That relates to what my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) just said. The interest rate here, which the Minister knows is quite high, puts people off. I urge him to look into what can be done to have a system similar to that in the United States.

Of course, not all courses or institutions offer the same opportunities for employment after graduating. A history degree from a Russell Group university could, after five years, see someone earning double what they would have earned had they received the same degree from a less prestigious institution. University graduates have traditionally out-earned their non-graduate peers, but the gap appears to be narrowing. The value of a degree has begun to decline as the supply of graduates has outstripped demand. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently warned that further increases in the number of graduates could lessen the financial gains of a degree.

The Minister knows that I am passionate about and strongly believe in apprenticeships, and he is a huge supporter of degree apprenticeships. It is important that all students know that there is a choice. There is a

chance that we can offer every young person an apprenticeship, all the way from level 2 right up to degree level. We need as much investment as possible in degree apprenticeships, for which there is no loan. Apprentices earn while they learn, are virtually guaranteed to get a job afterwards, and get the skills and training they need. That would be a huge boon to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The levy must be used to fund degree apprenticeships as much as possible, as this will transform the nature of the debate, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. At this stage, as colleagues will be aware, I have not imposed any time limit on Back-Bench speeches, and I would prefer not to have to do so from the Chair, but it might be a helpful guide to colleagues if I say that a seven-minute speech by each colleague would probably enable everybody to contribute. If somebody goes on longer, let that Member be clear that he or she is stopping other Members speaking, which would seem rather unfair.

4.5 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and I congratulate him on his election as Chair of the Select Committee and on his thoughtful contribution to the debate, which bodes well for the future. I represent more students—some 36,000 at the last count—than any other Member of this House, and consequently I chair the all-party parliamentary group on students. I represent many post-2012 graduates as well. They have been described as “generation rent” but we might also describe them as “generation debt”. The poorer the family they come from, the greater the debt as a result of the Government’s actions, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported. We are talking about debts of up to £57,000.

It is five years since the coalition Government forced through the £9,000 fees, but the impact is only beginning to take effect. This recent election was the first to be held since students starting graduating with the debt as a consequence of £9,000 fees—in May 2015, they had not started to do so. As a consequence, the issue took centre stage in this election. It is an issue not just for generation debt, but for their parents and, apparently, for some senior members of the Government. Even the Prime Minister’s deputy, the First Secretary of State, says, in a way that contradicts the confidence of the Minister, that we need to have a national debate on the issue. He is right, because we do, and this is only an opening salvo. We need to examine how we can provide the funding that our universities need to maintain their world-leading position, but without burdening our young people with unsustainable debt. That is the big challenge.

There are some immediate things that the Government could do on this. First, they could scrap the proposed increase in interest rates to 6.1% from the current 4.6%. This will be 6.1% at a time when the base rate is 0.25% and rates for average mortgages are less than 4%. The Minister will say that this is an automatic rise based on the formula of RPI plus 3%, but that formula is wrong. It means, as the IFS estimated, that students are accruing

an average of £5,800 of additional debt in interest during their studies—before they even have the chance to start paying it off. As the former skills Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), has argued:

“It is unutterably depressing for hard-working students to see the amount they owe spiralling upwards, before they have even started paying it off.”

The greatest burden is on the students from the poorest homes. So will today’s Minister hear what his colleagues are saying, what students and parents are saying, and what this House is saying, and commit to press the Chancellor to scrap the proposed increase in the interest rate and to review the formula?

A second thing the Government should do immediately is reintroduce maintenance grants for students from lower-income households. The grants were a central part of the package put together in 2012 and without that commitment this House would probably not have passed the proposals that saw tuition fees rise, because the grants mitigated the impact of trebling the fees. Scrapping grants for the poorest at the first opportunity after the 2015 election says a lot about this Government’s priorities and went a long way towards undermining confidence in the system.

While we are on the question of confidence in the system, the Government should think again on their retrospective changes to the terms of repayment, which make graduates pay for the Government’s miscalculation of the cost of the funding system and the escalating RAB—resource accounting and budgeting—charge. The Minister says it was a conscious decision; he knows well enough that the conscious decision his predecessor talked to the House about involved a RAB charge of 28%. That got out of control—it rose into the 40% area, and it was even being modelled at more than 50%—and the Government made graduates pay for their miscalculation.

Anticipating that before the 2015 general election, I asked Ministers for assurances that they would not make students pay for the Government’s mistakes by changing the terms of the 2012 system, and the Minister’s predecessor told me there were no plans to do so. Running into the election, the promise to students was that there were no plans to change the terms of the repayments. However, no sooner were the votes counted than the plans were rolled out in the 2015 Budget, freezing the repayment threshold and making graduates pay more than they signed up for. Conservative Members talk about broken promises, but there could be no worse breach of faith, breach of promise and breach of contract than that retrospective change. It is, frankly, fraudulent, and if this had been any other organisation than the Government, the Financial Conduct Authority would get involved. This decision undermines confidence in the loans system, and it should be reversed.

Let me highlight one further thing, of many, that should change: the decision to scrap bursaries and to introduce fees and loans for nursing, midwifery and allied health courses. Back in January 2016, when we debated the issue in Westminster Hall, the then Health Minister, Ben Gummer, told Members that the Government wanted—listen to this—

“to spread to nurses the same benefits that have been realised in the rest of the student population.”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 236WH.]

Some of us in the debate expressed some scepticism that nurses and midwives would see £50,000 of debt as a benefit. We warned that these courses, which still provided a route into professional careers for those who were put off university by fees—mature students and others from low-income backgrounds—would see applications fall, at a time when we need more nurses.

Those concerns were cavalierly dismissed by the Government, but the final numbers have been published in the last few days, and Sheffield Hallam University in my city has seen a 22% drop, with the drop across the country estimated at 26%. The Government were clearly wrong. Will they accept that and reverse their decision on bursaries? They have been wrong time and again. We need a fresh start in this whole policy area.

4.12 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): At the general election, the Labour party managed to rally an extraordinary number of young people to its cause—in one constituency, it even had young people standing on roundabouts with “Vote Labour” signs. I am sure many Labour Members will concede that they have those votes to thank for their place in this House today.

It is not difficult to see why students were tempted: not only did Labour promise to abolish tuition fees, but there was even talk of forgiving all student loan debt—an extraordinary, expensive undertaking. I wonder what those young voters must think now, barely a month on from the election, as they see Labour desperately trying to downgrade that promise to an aspiration, or as they see Wales—the only corner of the kingdom where the Labour party is in power—actually increasing fees, despite Labour’s having attacked them during the campaign.

What goes around comes around. I should inform the House that the film of the Labour party, effectively, backtracking on this promise has been shared 1.3 million times, so perhaps those roundabouts will not be quite so full of young students holding up signs for the Labour party at the next general election.

Perhaps the Labour party, including in Wales, now realises that there are very progressive elements to the tuition fee system.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: I am not going to give way at the moment.

Loans are available in this progressive system to everybody. They are paid back only when the student is earning enough to afford it, and the amount to be repaid scales up with income. Effectively, student loans are a type of graduate tax, rather than a tax on everyone, including everyone who does not go to university. No bailiffs are sent out to collect on student loans, and after 30 years any outstanding debt is forgiven by the Government. No other loan has so many protections built in for low earners.

However, to focus narrowly on the repayment structure is to ignore so much of what makes the current system a good deal for less-advantaged students. It secures more places and higher-quality teaching.

I know there is a lot of nostalgia in some circles for the days when university was free, but too often those people fail to acknowledge that this was only possible because the proportion of school leavers who went on

[*Julian Knight*]

to higher education was tiny. I was the first member of my family to go to university. I come from a council house background and a lone-parent family. It was a really unusual event at my school to go to university, to such an extent that when people found out that I had a place, I and a few others at my school were called on stage. When I went to university, only one in 10 were able to take up the advantages that I had, and I do not want us to go back there, under any circumstances.

When the previous Labour Government decided to massively expand higher education, the costs for universities ballooned, and it was rightly decided that those who stood to benefit should shoulder a share of the cost. The alternative was to fund the entire cost from general taxation—shifting the burden to millions of people who have never had higher education—or to leave it to universities to fill in the gaps in their budgets themselves. Scotland illustrates the dangers of that approach. Local students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been consistently squeezed out of Scottish universities in favour of fee-paying international students.

Marion Fellows: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: I am not going to give way, I am afraid.

Marion Fellows rose—

Julian Knight: Actually, I will.

Marion Fellows indicated dissent.

Julian Knight: Scotland used to say to the rest of the United Kingdom, “We have a gold standard in education.” I think it is a matter of shame that the SNP has presided over the collapse of Scottish education in the way that it has.

Marion Fellows: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Julian Knight: No—you had your chance.

As all studies show, the introduction of fees in England has seen an increase in the number of students from poorer backgrounds. Tuition fees have opened up the opportunity to study, and the repayment structure shelters them if they do not get the graduate dividend that they hoped for.

Of course, the current system is not perfect. There are legitimate questions over the interest levied on loans, and especially about the fact that nearly every university charges the maximum amount of fees. Price signals should be an important way for students to gauge the actual value of a degree course. I also think that some courses may be too long, and if they were to be time-limited, that would bring down the costs for all. But abolishing fees and forgiving debts that will only ever be repaid by high earners, and replacing the current system with one that taxes those who do not benefit or leaves universities fighting over high-income applicants, would be a huge transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, and a ferocious attack on opportunity and social mobility.

4.17 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech in this important debate on tuition fees—a subject that

came up time and time again on the doorstep in Blaydon. I know this debate will be of interest to many constituents.

I would like to start by thanking the people of Blaydon constituency for electing me to represent them here. It is a great privilege. Some of you may first have heard of Blaydon through our local anthem, “Blaydon Races”, played proudly by many a brass band at the Durham miners gala. You will be glad to hear, Mr Speaker, that I will not be bursting into song in this Chamber—parliamentary decorum and a lack of musical talent mean that I should avoid that at all costs—but it does remain a theme and a constant symbol of our proud and sometimes raucous local history.

It is customary in maiden speeches to talk about your predecessor, and for me it is not just a tradition but a matter of great personal pleasure to talk about my great friend and comrade, Dave Anderson. Dave served Blaydon very well in the 12 years he was in this House, and was—and still is—a great champion of working people not just in Blaydon but throughout the trade union movement, working most recently on the Shrewsbury 24 campaign with Ricky Tomlinson. As a former Unison president, Dave spoke up for the public service workers who do so much to deliver the vital services that we all need. Dave will also be remembered here for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on muscular dystrophy—a campaign close to his heart as it affected his family, and for which he twice received charity champion awards in this place.

In this maiden speech, I want to talk about the communities that make up the constituency—a constituency that takes in rural areas, industrial sites and areas of great natural beauty, representing the traditions, past and present, of Blaydon. I start from Chopwell, in the west, separated from County Durham by another river, the Derwent. Chopwell, known as “Little Moscow” for its strong socialist links, is a community defined for many years by its proud mining history, and it retains its strong community links and boasts the Chopwell woods, which were thankfully saved from sell-off in 2011. Then I move on to Crawcrook and Greenside, where last Sunday I was proud to open the Greenside community picnic, part of the celebrations to commemorate the last shift at the local pit, and where on 8 July I marched with the local community and the band through the village on our way to Durham for the miners gala, banner flying high. And on to Ryton, where the beautiful Ryton Willows and the Keelman’s Way run alongside the River Tyne towards Blaydon itself. The old Blaydon horse races have long been replaced by a road race on 9 June each year from Newcastle to Blaydon. You can still see hundreds of people

“Gannin’ along the Scotswood Road”,

not to see the Blaydon races, but taking part in them.

Then on to Whickham, where Dave Peacock and other members of the local community have recreated a lost garden, making a tranquil green retreat in the village open to all, and to Sunniside, another former mining community that is proud of its history, as well as to Winlaton and High Spen, where the red kite now flourishes after being reintroduced some years ago. It was magnificent to see them high overhead as we knocked on doors. Further south and east are the communities of Birtley, Lamesley and Kibblesworth, and the magnificent Angel of the North. Created by Antony Gormley, it

looms over the A1 and the surrounding landscape, demonstrating the strength and endurance of our local communities. Sadly, I never managed to identify the Angel's voting intention, but I think I could have a guess.

Blaydon is also open for business, taking in much of the Team Valley trading estate and the Metro Centre, representing manufacturing and retail. On the day we have seen the new polymer £10 note, I must mention De La Rue, which produces passports at the Blaydon site—and long may that continue.

These communities, and so many more I could mention, make up my constituency of Blaydon, but as in so many areas, the people of Blaydon have had much to deal with. They have felt the impact of austerity. Too many of my constituents have been hit hard—by the bedroom tax, by benefit sanctions, by reassessments for employment and support allowance or for the personal independence payment—and too many find themselves without money to buy the necessities of life for their family, like food or money to pay for gas and electric. It is fortunate for them that we have a well-established food bank in Blaydon, and I must pay tribute here to the Reverend Tracey Hume, who has worked with so many local volunteers in Blaydon to make sure that those who need help get it. What they do is magnificent, but this should not be needed in 2017.

Then there are the 1950s-born women, who told me on the doorstep how badly they have been hit by the equalisation of state pensions. This cannot be right or just. Mr Speaker, I must declare an interest as one of the 1950s-born women. Sadly, unlike me, most of them are not able to take up an apprenticeship in this House and must manage as best they can, but I intend to do all I can to work for them.

All of us come to this House with not just a passion for politics, but a personal history that influences the issues we care about, and I want to share a little of mine. Seventeen years ago, my husband, Charlie, ended his life by suicide. Many of you in this House will have been affected by suicide, but you only find out how many others have been affected when it happens to you. I do not ask for sympathy; I ask for your support for action to reduce the number of people who take their lives. I am glad to be a Samaritans listening volunteer, but we need deeds as well as words to prevent suicide.

In March, Samaritans produced a report, “Dying from inequality”. To put it bluntly, a rigorous academic study has shown that suicide risk increases when people face unemployment, job uncertainty and poverty. These are the very problems faced by the constituents I have talked about and by many others. Two weeks ago, I had the chance to ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he planned to take in the light of this report, and he told me that he always listens to the views of Samaritans. I give notice that I will be pressing the Secretary of State for Health and other Government Ministers to take real action to tackle the causes that lead to too many people taking their own life. As Samaritans chief executive, Ruth Sutherland, said:

“Each suicide statistic is a person. The employee on a zero hour’s contract is somebody’s parent or child. A person at risk of losing their home may be a sibling or a friend. And each one of them will leave others devastated, and potentially more disadvantaged too, if they take their own life. This is a call for us as individuals to care more and for organisations that can make a difference, to do so.”

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this debate. I will do all that I can in this House and in my constituency to speak up for the people of Blaydon and to represent them in the best way that I can.

Mr Speaker: I thank and congratulate the hon. Lady on that wonderful maiden speech.

4.25 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate and a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). I congratulate her on her maiden speech, which was very moving and powerful, particularly in relation to suicide. We all share her sentiment and hope to see greater progress on that. It is a terrible tragedy that so many still choose to take their own lives.

Having stood on many a football terrace, I am familiar with the Blaydon anthem, but I do not think that the edited lyrics to which I have been subjected are repeatable in this Chamber. I welcome the hon. Lady to the House.

This debate is on an important subject. Having intervened earlier on the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), I have great sympathy for her. She has maintained her composure in the face of her party’s policy wobble over historical student debt, but, if we look at what the Leader of the Opposition said to the *NME* prior to the election, we cannot form any conclusion other than that he wished to wipe out historical student debt. He said that he would “deal with it.” Those were his words. What other conclusion could we form?

The politics of this are quite cynical. Talking about helping students means helping a large number of people, but it is a limited base. Spreading policies to all graduates with historical student debt, however, means appealing to a vast number of people, so to renege on that so clearly is disappointing and deceptive.

Equally, we all have to accept that people are worried about levels of student debt. I have four children and worry about them, should they ever get to university, racking up enormous debts. Who, as a parent and a human being, would not be concerned about that? However, we have to think rationally about the issue.

There are measures that can be used to ameliorate the situation. My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chairman of the Education Committee, mentioned interest. Of course, student debts are packaged and bought on the basis of securitisation. I want to understand more about how that works, including the redemption penalties and whether it is possible to change those contracts without huge cost to the taxpayer. We would all benefit from knowing more about that. Perhaps my right hon. Friend’s Committee could take evidence on it.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a strong point about the level of interest on debt and securitisation. He will accept that, because of the high proportion of that debt that is written off, it is in effect a grant, so the interest rate will need to be higher to make it attractive to people who want to take on that security.

James Cartlidge: I am afraid and suspect that that is true. I think that it is also the case that the higher interest rate enabled the Government to increase the low threshold under Labour to the higher threshold of £21,000 under us.

On the subject of the cap—this goes back to my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow—if we are able to raise the threshold at which people pay, that is a fairer deal for the student because it ensures greater quality. They repay when their earnings reach a point where we think it is fair for them to start doing so. I think we should look at that, but it is not cheap. My understanding is that if we raise the threshold to £25,000, it will cost almost £2 billion a year in lost income to the Revenue. That is not a minor detail.

We really have to make a decision, as a country and a Parliament, about our priority. What is the most important thing that we want from higher education? Why do people go to university? In my view the most important thing is to have the highest-quality education possible—the best quality degrees. That is what matters. We need to think about the upside, which is that someone who goes to university could earn £250,000 more in their lifetime—the figure is often far more than that—than someone who does not. In fact, to access highly paid professional jobs people need a degree.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Was my hon. Friend as interested as I was to discover that the uplift is £250,000 for females and only £170,000 for males? Both are significant figures, but is it not interesting that the larger figure is the uplift for females who go to university?

James Cartlidge: I am always interested in female uplift. The striking thing is that, regardless of whether they are a man or a woman, university is an incredible opportunity for individuals to improve their standing and their circumstances and to get a career, so that they can afford a home and to raise a family. That is the upside.

To me, the most important thing is the quality of the degrees. I worry that if we go back to a free system, the quality of degrees will not improve but fall, partly because the funding will fall. We will go back to rationing the funding and the places. If we are honest, will the students who go to university when it is “free” take their education as seriously as those who go when it is not? Of course, it is not free. That is the great delusion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, it is not free; it is just that somebody else pays, rather than the beneficiary. The whole of society pays.

The money has to come from somewhere. The Labour party will supposedly pay for it by raising corporation tax. Never mind the fact that all the evidence shows that by cutting corporation tax, we are raising the revenue to the Exchequer. This will not happen without a cost. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) chatters about the Laffer curve—he’s having a laugh about the Laffer curve! If Labour Members studied this, they would realise the reality. The OECD figures show that the predicted tax take from corporation tax when it goes to 17% will be the same percentage of GDP as in 2010 when it was at 26%.

The point is that there is a downside of going back to free education. We have to pay for it in some way. What we need is the upside, and the upside is having a competitive graduate system so that our graduates have the best quality qualifications.

I want to conclude with the big picture. The big picture is that people who go to university now are heading into a much more competitive labour market—a globalised, international labour market. Whatever the effects of Brexit are, that will not change. When our children go to university, they will be up against it. They will be up against graduates from India and all over the world. We need to give them the best weapons in their hands—the best tools with which to navigate their way through the challenges of life—and that means getting the best possible qualifications. I therefore urge my hon. Friends to consider the importance of quality.

Finally, I will remark on a very welcome measure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has brought in. As I understand it, universities will be able to raise fees to the maximum level only if they can demonstrate that their teaching is of the highest quality. We are moving towards a quality-based scheme. I very much welcome that and we should all support it.

4.32 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on her moving, personal and powerful maiden speech, and wish her well for what I hope will be her long and distinguished service to the House.

The late, great Ron Dearing set out in his compact a clear route map for how higher education should be funded. Ultimately, it was to be funded by the beneficiaries. Graduates should make a contribution as beneficiaries; business should make a contribution, because it benefits from well-educated graduates; and society, as taxpayers, should make a contribution, because collectively we benefit from the contribution our universities make, both through learning and teaching, and through their wider impact on our country.

Under the Conservatives in government, first with the Liberal Democrats, then alone and now with the Democratic Unionist party, the Dearing compact has been broken. People in this country graduate with the highest levels of debt anywhere in the world. Most terribly of all, it is students from the poorest backgrounds who graduate with the greatest debt.

Having followed these debates for some time, dating back to my tenure as president of the National Union of Students, I think that one of the most egregious things about Conservative policy on higher education is that every single concession that was fought for and won has been gradually eroded. Maintenance grants, which were reintroduced to help people from the poorest backgrounds, have been abolished by the Conservatives. Interest rates are now well above inflation, which is not what was promised. The repayment threshold has been frozen, which means that the poorest graduates will pay back a disproportionate amount. The NHS bursary has been abolished, which unsurprisingly has led to a free-fall in nursing applications. The part-time and mature access rate would make any decent Government blush.

Michael Tomlinson: On poorer students, does the hon. Gentleman not welcome the fact that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university than ever before—an increase of 43% from 2009 to 2016, and an increase of 73% from 2006 to today?

Wes Streeting: As someone who has always campaigned for wider access to higher education and who believes strongly that we should have more, rather than fewer, better educated people in our country, I welcome the fact that more students are in higher education than ever before. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman raises that point, because it brings me to the issue of Government complacency. It is not really a surprise that more young people are going to university than ever before: there are more young people than ever before. In addition to the shocking record on part-time and mature access—students in those cohorts tend to be from non-traditional and under-represented backgrounds in higher education—the Government are hugely complacent about the extent to which working-class young people are being deterred from accessing higher education by fear of tuition fees and debt.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman has made a specious point. It is the rate for people from disadvantaged backgrounds that is 42% higher than it was in 2009-10. That has nothing to do with the number, although that is also higher.

Wes Streeting: The Minister is right that there has been progress—I do not doubt that—but once again he underlines my point about complacency. Research published by the distinguished academic Professor Claire Callender of University College London warned:

“When we compared working and upper-class students with similar GCSE results, taking account of differences in gender, ethnicity and type of school attended...a lower percentage of working-class students had applied to university...compared with those from an upper-class background...because of these fears.

Our study is an important reminder that academic achievement at school cannot adequately explain the lower proportion of students from poorer backgrounds. High fees and fear of debt play a crucial role.”

I caution the Government against complacency on this issue. They have been consistently complacent about it since they decided to treble fees. If they were not complacent, they would never have abolished the maintenance grants, which was one of the most terrible policies of the last Parliament.

It is not surprising that so many people—not just young people, but parents and grandparents—are angry about the extent to which students and graduates have been plunged into record levels of debt. It is not surprising that the issue has hit the top of the political agenda. It is not only Ministers who are to blame; university vice-chancellors should take some responsibility, too. There is scant evidence that trebling university tuition fees has led to a better quality of experience for undergraduate students. In fact, the student experience survey suggests the opposite. Students believe they get less value for money than they did before. Frankly, looking at retention rates and graduate destination data for certain courses at certain universities, those vice-chancellors who continue to award themselves inflation-busting pay increases should be ashamed.

The truth is that if people from a disadvantaged background take the plunge, go to university, take on the risk of the debt and, for whatever reason, are unable to complete the course, the cost to them is far higher than if they had never been to university—not just in terms of the debt that they still have to repay, but because on their CVs they will forever be branded failures by employers. Having been awash with cash, thanks to higher fees, in a way that the rest of the public sector has not, universities have not demonstrated the duty of care or responsibility to students that I would expect for the fees that they charge and the level of debt that results. We have to be much firmer with universities.

My final point is a broader one about where social mobility in this country is headed and the state of political debate about that. I am horrified by the number of housing cases that I deal with involving children, and the impact on their education. As I said in Communities and Local Government questions this week, I did a school visit last week, and at the end of the Q and A with a group of year 6 students, I was pulled aside by an 11-year-old boy who told me that he, his mother and his two brothers have been living in one room in a hostel, in so-called temporary accommodation, for more than a year.

I will never forget the conversation that I had in my surgery with a mum and her teenage daughter. Again, they were living in one room, in a bed and breakfast. The daughter has to do her homework under the covers at night, with a torch. She does not want to disturb her mother’s sleep, because her mother works all hours to try to make ends meet—evidently not very successfully, which is why they are stuck in poverty in a single room in a hostel.

I will certainly never forget another mother who came to me, a victim of domestic violence living in Ilford with three children, two of primary-school age and one teenager. Her daughter had admitted that she had considered taking her own life because her circumstances were so appalling. That family do not live in Ilford any more; they were moved to Harrow in west London, and then to Wolverhampton.

This is what really upsets me, as someone who grew up on a council estate and did not enjoy the experience: however bad I thought my childhood was—growing up in poverty and relying on the benefits system; living in a council flat that was not nice and to which I did not want to invite friends round to play, because it was not the sort of environment in which they would feel welcome—I realise how lucky I was now. The policies of successive Conservative Governments have led us to a point at which we are disrupting children’s education by moving them from pillar to post in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation, with huge consequences for their education today and their life chances tomorrow.

If the Government were serious about social mobility, it would be an overriding priority running through every single Department. However, their policies and their pet projects—grammar schools, free schools and everything else—are so far removed from the reality of most people in the country, and from policies that would genuinely make a transformational difference, that they really ought to be ashamed. Theirs may be the largest party, but there is a reason for their failure to win a majority at the general election, and that is their deep detachment from the everyday lives of most people in this country.

4.41 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), although I did not concur with all his points. I will address one or two of them in my speech. First, however, let me join others in congratulating the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). She made a very touching and well-delivered speech, and it was wonderful to hear about her work in the Samaritans, which—in addition to her work as a Member of Parliament—shows that she is a true public servant. Whatever the public or the media may say, I believe that the vast majority of people who decide to enter the world of parliamentary politics do so because they want to make the world a better place, and it is clear that that is why the hon. Lady is sitting on the green Benches today. I welcome her to the House.

I think that all of us, when we remember our time at school, describe someone as our favourite teacher. Mine was a gentleman called Ken Hudson, my physics teacher. Ken was a pipe-smoking, bespectacled gentleman with a haircut like Ray Reardon's—hon. Members may remember that he was a snooker player. Ken was definitely my inspiration, although I did not do tremendously well in physics at A-level or at college.

I remember the day we did our physics mock O-level. None of the class did particularly well. Ken walked into our classroom, stood by the blackboard, wiped it down, and just looked at us until we all went very quiet. Then he wrote across the blackboard in chalk, “The world does not owe you a living”. That has stuck with me for 37 years, and it has stuck with my children, too, because I tell them about it an awful lot—the principle that the world does not owe anyone a living. I also tell them that their parents do not owe them a living.

My son, who had just left his sixth form, had to choose whether to go to university or enter the world of work. Was he going to invest in his education? Was he going to university? If a person can provide for themselves at 18, the world does not owe them a living. At that point, it is their decision whether to invest their money—tuition fees and student accommodation away from home—and time. All that would add to my son's debt in the future. Did he want to spend up to £30,000, £40,000 or £50,000 on his education, which might pay in the future? As we have heard, it could pay up to a quarter of million pounds over a lifetime, so that might have been a sensible choice to make. He decided not to do that, but instead to move into the world of work. Do I think it is right that he, having made that decision, should fund others who choose to go down a different route and enter higher education and university? I do not think it is right that he should have to bear that burden; surely the burden should be carried by those who benefit most from that education.

Of course other people benefit from the fact that our society is better educated, but there is a clear correlation between someone's education and their investment in it, and the long-term return that they will see from it. A balance needs to be struck; somebody has to pay. We do not have a bottomless pit of money; that is an absolute fact. So who will pay is the key question.

I tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), because I wanted to ask him a question. He has a very sensible economic perspective. At a time when we are spending £60 billion more every

year than we are collecting in taxes, does he honestly feel that the £11.2 billion a year allocated to this policy in the Labour manifesto is the best way to spend that public money at this time, with all the other demands we have, including on our healthcare and our pre-18 education? Does he honestly feel that is the best use of that public money? I do not.

We have to make ends meet in this country, and therefore must choose where to allocate our resources for the best effect. [*Interruption.*] I am happy to take an intervention, but the point is that the Labour manifesto clearly has £250 billion of extra spending, plus £25 billion a year in infrastructure spending, which is another £125 billion. It would also nationalise the water companies and the railways. That amounts to £500 billion of extra debt. That same manifesto also says that if Labour had been in government they would have reduced the national debt over the course of this Parliament. How is that possible? How does any of this stack up? It is uncosted spending after uncosted spending.

The issue of past student debt was not in the manifesto, of course, but what the Leader of the Opposition said about that is clear, and not every party commitment needs to be in the manifesto for people to have a reasonable degree of expectation that it will be delivered. He said:

“I will deal with those already burdened with student debt.”
That was a clear commitment. So on top of that £500 billion, there is another £111 billion—uncosted debt after uncosted debt. That is the reality, and we cannot carry on like that. We must not go back to the 1970s, which is when I grew up; my household had uncollected rubbish and the TV used to go off at 10 o'clock. I am old enough to remember that, and we will return to it if we do not maintain a sensible economic policy.

It is wrong to think that we on this side of the House are not worried about student debt. Of course I am worried about student debt—both that of the many students across the country, and potentially that of my children, as I have three more children, some of whom might choose to go to university. We should be talking about constructive ways of allowing students to go through university and benefit from higher education without incurring so much debt. One way of doing so would be to have shorter courses. My daughter is looking at a psychology course.

Joseph Johnson: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, enacted on the last day of the last Session, makes it possible for universities to offer shorter courses, such as two-year degrees.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is an example of ideas in action, and it is tremendous news. I should have been following that more closely, but—[*Interruption.*] I see that you want me to conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will make a couple of quick points, if I may.

We should look at the US system, with its modular courses. Students can also live closer to home and not incur the accommodation and living costs involved in moving away. There are ways to reduce the financial impact on students, but overall this is about choice and who pays for those choices. I believe the burden of the cost should be borne by those who benefit from the education.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call James Frith to make his maiden speech.

4.49 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an absolute pleasure to be here making my maiden speech during this debate on tuition fees, and I give thanks to the people of Bury, Tottington and Ramsbottom for the fact that I am standing here in the first place. Bury North is an amazing place, and I have 100 years of history there, from my late great-grandfather, a vicar in Bury, to me, his great-grandson, the new MP. For me and my wife, Nikki, and our three children—with a fourth on the way—it is our family's home town.

Growing up, public service was a staple of my home life. My mum was a leaving-care worker and magistrate with a passion for music. Dad was a Church of England minister with a love of cricket and politics. And so it goes that my passions are politics and music. These were supercharged within me when, 20 years ago, I witnessed Romania and South Africa newly emerging as political states, recovering from a ruthless dictator and the abhorrence of apartheid respectively.

I then moved to the music capital of the world—Manchester—to study. There, I formed an indie rock and roll band, in which I was the singer for 12 years. I joined the Labour party and married a Bury woman. The rest is history. I never did get that elusive record deal, though few people need to know me for long before learning that I did in fact play Glastonbury festival, long before it became the thing to do. [*Laughter.*] I'd have killed for his crowds, though.

During the election—the competition, as my son, Henry, called it—my eldest daughter, Jemima, asked me, “What is an MP, Daddy?” I tried to explain, saying, “If someone wants help, might be in trouble, wants something changing, needs to talk to someone or maybe just has a really good idea, they might go and see their MP.” Jemima looked at me and said, “Well, Daddy, you're my MP already.”

It is customary to pay tribute to one's predecessor. David Nuttall was graceful in his victory last time, as he was in his defeat this time. For all our considerable political differences, I always found him to be an affable man. I wish him and his wife the very best for the future.

Bury North is a fantastic place to live. It is book-ended by two traditional market towns, and the world-famous Bury market is home to the new superfood, Bury black pudding. There is also a magnificent market in Ramsbottom, from where, one winter morning, my wife started her own business. My constituency stretches from the foothills of the Lancashire Pennines in the north—it is overlooked by Peel Tower atop Holcombe Hill—to Gigg Lane, home of the mighty Shakers, Bury FC, in the south. Proudly, we are home to the Lancashire Fusiliers and veterans. They are legendary for being awarded six Victoria Crosses before breakfast at the battle of Gallipoli in 1915—a battle in which one Clement Attlee also fought.

Local charities including SuperJosh, Annabelle's Challenge and Bury hospice are an inspiration. Whether attending a community event at the Jinnah Centre, relaxing around the boundary at Greenmount cricket club, enjoying our countryside or a curry at the Jewel in the Crown, or taking the East Lancashire railway up to

Ramsbottom, all human life and experience is there. Local employers set high standards, drawing on the strengths of our town and its heritage. They include the award-winning Eagle and Child pub and Pennine Communications. Stories of this fine place are expertly retold by the local paper, the *Bury Times*. My new constituency office will be hosted in the same building as the Freedom church, which welcomes everyone to its door with “it's great to see you”—a simple message that sums Bury up.

But, Mr Speaker—sorry; Madam Deputy Speaker—Bury has had seven years of bad luck, with £120 million cut from services, local government and our economy. Our walk-in centre is used by thousands of patients a month. They rely on it not as Labour or Conservative supporters but as patients, so why is it threatened with closure? The reality of austerity is being lived through in hospital wards, or by carers and the underpaid, overworked parents who know differently. Mental health services are disappearing. We do not have enough nurses because the Government's own target is 20,000 short. Children with special educational needs are no longer supported. Social care has been reduced to minutes per day. Last year, 6,000 food parcels were handed out in Bury alone. A veteran in Bury had his benefits sanctioned for selling poppies. There is no access to finance for many of our growing businesses without people risking the family home. In this once weather-vane seat many feel, at best, that we have stood still as a country; many more feel stood on.

As my daughter might ask, so we say from this House: what are we for? What do we do? For Bury North, I am here to help to determine what comes next. That is the point of being here: the power to intervene, to disrupt and to change; the authority to speak out and to help manage. That is the point, not to manage decline or sponsor disadvantage. But austerity continues at pace. Austerity is not “living within our means”; austerity is lifeless economics. We must be as much about humanity as about eventually balancing the books. You grow by investing. You nurture talent and empower people. A business would not seek to grow by taking its people off the road, and nor should a country.

I believe that politics is a force for good and for hope, not an excuse for despair. My belief in Labour values is why I believe we need a fairer, more diverse economy. We need an economy that is more innovative and entrepreneurial and that takes risks and gives rewards. We need an economy with work-life balance, an economy that affirms the fact that both public and private sectors combine to create wealth. From nursery to university, these ambitions should feature, too. We need proper investment paid for by a broader economy. We should be empowered by a curriculum that prepares our young people for a successful, modern working life, whether via an apprenticeship or a degree, or if they are starting up for themselves, not the ever-narrowing curriculum it has become.

Too often, it is our young people who have been the first to face the political calculation of this place. With tuition fees as they are, they face a future saddled with debt, and rising interest rates on that debt. We must move to a higher-skilled economic ground. We must harness our assets: creativity, intuition, emotion, empathy and intelligence. In doing so, we must outbid the threat to jobs and livelihoods that automation poses for so many. We need a collaboration of all levels of education,

[James Frith]

research development, trade unions, business and new national industry, pulled together by the Government, jumpstarting the plan.

In closing, Mr Speaker—sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker; you will have marked me out already. On Brexit, please, a less bombastic approach and more grace; a Brexit that works for Bury is what I have said. I am not religious about Brexit—few people are—but away from this bubble, Brexit for many was a chance to stop the show, smash the glass and pull the leave cord, and it struck a chord. For the first time, many who have not been listened to have now been heard, but they did not vote to be worse off or poorer.

I am proud that in Bury North people voted to trust Labour with public services, and to trust Labour to ensure that industries are made anew and that our workers are protected. My mission is to improve the lives and the living of everyone I represent in Bury North, whether they voted for me or not.

I am not here to trade insult but to advance our argument. Politics—the great intervener, the enabler, the change we want to see, the kicking out and the putting in—may too often be a wasted force, but it is a force for good. After a historic result in Bury North, I now join my colleagues in what might feel to this musician like a difficult second album. I will be working with my friends and colleagues to advance our argument and win it with inspiration, assurance and vision. Desmond Tutu once said “never underestimate man’s capacity to do wrong. But never underestimate man’s capacity for good also.” The same is true of our estimation of politics, and the responsibility on us to ensure that our politics’ capacity for good begins in this place—restoring faith in politics and professing to a new generation that its power is the best force for good and for change that we have for the many, not the few.

5.1 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith). He paid a fitting and generous tribute to his predecessor and my friend, David Nuttall. He spoke with eloquence and with confidence. He said that his passions are politics and music; I would stick to politics and cricket. He said that we should not be trading insults, so I look forward not to trading insults with him in future but to disagreeing well. I am sure there is much on which we will disagree, but I look forward to his future contributions in this place.

In a very short speech, I shall make just a few points. The history of tuition fees has already been mentioned, providing a helpful reminder of what happened. The fees were introduced by the Labour party in 1998. In 2001, the Labour party manifesto pledged:

“We will not introduce top-up fees.”

Then Labour proceeded to do just that in 2004. The final piece of the jigsaw that has not yet been mentioned is the Liberal Democrats’ pledge in 2010 that they would scrap university tuition fees, and, in coalition, they voted to put them up.

This debate is not just a timely reminder of those facts, but an opportunity for us to consider the issue of social justice. It is an issue that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the new Chairman

of the Education Committee, picked up. I love his vision and his picture of the ladder. What we mean by social justice should be opportunities for the next generation, particularly for those who are less advantaged. Others can make the economic argument. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) did so eloquently and well. I fear that the Leader of the Opposition has dug himself into a bit of a hole if we listen to what he said in the run-up to the election campaign—the promise that he made on the stump to students—and what was said at the Dispatch Box this afternoon.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but more people from disadvantaged backgrounds are now going to university than ever before—not just more people, but a higher proportion of people. The Minister set it out quite rightly at 43%. It has gone up from 13.5% in 2009-10 to 19.5% in 2016. The proportion has gone up 73% since 2006. This is not an accident, but a result of this Government’s policy. The quid pro quo is that we give universities more money, but, as part of the deal, they must ensure that there is social justice and that more people from less well-off backgrounds get to university. We heard some of that from the Minister this afternoon. I look forward to more about it in the future. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) said that we should not be complacent. He is absolutely right—we should not, and this Minister and this Government should ensure that these statistics persist and that we continue to see more people from poorer backgrounds going to university, improving their life chances. It is happening now under a Conservative Government.

What would happen if Labour got into power and introduced its policy? We would see a reduction in funding, reduced access, crumbling institutions and fewer students—and, importantly, on the question of social justice, we would see fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university. How do we know that is true? How do we know that is right? We look at Scotland; we look at what has happened when student tuition fees have been taken away. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made this point in an intervention earlier and he is absolutely right. These are not my words but those of the Sutton Trust—they tried it in Scotland and there were “particularly negative consequences for less advantaged students.” If people are concerned about social justice and about the ladder mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow, they should follow this Government’s policy on tuition fees.

5.5 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to give my maiden speech in this important debate on education fees. Many young people are facing this increased burden more often.

It is with great pride that I rise to speak representing a constituency in my home city of Manchester. In May, the city I love was the victim of a terrible attack—22 adults and children were killed and more than 100 people were injured attending a concert at Manchester Arena. It was an act of pure evil. Faced with this tragedy, the people of Manchester responded in the only way they know: with solidarity, with compassion, and with the determination that those who seek to endanger our way of life will not succeed.

When such events happen there is always a danger that some people will try to use them to divide us, and unfortunately we witnessed an increase in hate crimes in the wake of the attack, yet just a few weeks later the people of Manchester elected me—a Muslim—as the city's first ever BME MP. I cannot think of a more powerful message to the terrorists and bigots that their attempts to divide us will never succeed.

I am humbled to follow in the footsteps of my predecessor, the late Sir Gerald Kaufman. Sir Gerald was a legend in this place and he will be missed by Members on all sides. He brought colour to proceedings here—sometimes literally through his keen sense of style, and at other times through his sharp wit. He served in this House for almost 47 years, until he passed away earlier this year. He served in many roles: as an Environment Minister, a senior shadow Cabinet member, Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, and later Father of the House. But above all, Sir Gerald was a tireless champion for his constituents and in return he was loved by them. I worked with him for 20 years on issues such as peace in south Asia and the middle east and standing up for oppressed people in general—work that I will try to continue in this House. I was always grateful for his support, advice and, above all, his friendship. I know he will be a hard act to follow, and although I cannot promise to match his dress sense I will try my best to at least fill his shoes. Most of all, I will never forget the people of Manchester Gorton, who have given me the privilege of representing them here.

The Gorton constituency is a wonderfully diverse and vibrant place, taking in Fallowfield, Gorton, Levenshulme, Longsight, Rusholme and Whalley Range. It has thriving local businesses, such as Belle Vue speedway and dog track; wonderful green spaces such as Platt Fields, Debdale, Alexandra and Crowcroft parks; and, of course, the famous curry mile. It is also a spiritual place, home to a huge number of places of worship, with beautiful historic buildings such as Gorton monastery and Victoria Park mosque, the first mosque in Manchester.

But it is not without its challenges: seven years of austerity have hit my constituents hard; more than one in three children live in poverty, the average wage is £100 less than the national average; £300 million has been cut from Manchester City Council's budget; and there are 2,000 fewer police on our streets.

During my election campaign, I promised I would always put Manchester, Gorton first; that is exactly what I intend to do during my time in this place. Manchester is a thriving, world-class city and a great place to live. The people in my constituency are decent and hard-working. They play by the rules and do the right thing, but they have not always felt the benefits of our city's success and they have not had a fair deal from this Government. So I will stand against the cuts and further austerity, and I will fight for the extra investment in housing, schools, NHS and local businesses that Manchester, Gorton needs and deserves.

My own journey to this place has not been a typical one. I was born in Pakistan and came to the UK when I was adopted out of poverty as a child. Since then Manchester has been my home for nearly 40 years. I often tell people that although I was born in Pakistan, I was made in Manchester. I left school with no qualifications and, at 16, went straight into work as a labourer in a cotton mill. Later I became a bus driver and then a police officer, one of Manchester's very few BME officers

in the 1980s. That caught up with me during my election campaign when a voter approached me and said he would not vote for me. Like any candidate, I was a little hurt and wanted to know why. He said, "Twenty years ago, you arrested me." Even after a brief chat, I was not able to change his mind.

I always felt that I had missed out on an education. I was supporting my wife and young children, but I also went to night school, got my O-levels, A-levels and eventually a law degree. I became a solicitor because I wanted to defend those most in need. I worked my way up to become a partner at my own law firm in Gorton. Over the past 17 years, I have been a Manchester councillor and Lord Mayor, and latterly an MEP.

I entered politics because I believe in the power of social justice to transform lives, to bring hope and to deliver opportunity. I believe in a world in which someone's prospects should be determined by the content of their character and not by their circumstances at birth or the colour of their skin. Although progress has been made, it is clear from the recent increase in inequality that more is still to be done.

As a father, I can see society's unfairness clearly when I look at my children—I have three, two daughters and a son. I see them equally, but society does not. It is more than 45 years since the Equal Pay Act 1970, but women still earn less than men. I do not want to have to wait for another 45 years for my great-great-granddaughter to be treated equally.

In the House, I will always be a champion of equality; I will stand against anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and all other forms of discrimination. I look forward to the upcoming release of the race audit so that we can better ensure that our public services do not fail the most vulnerable in our society. I will no doubt touch more on such issues in future debate. I also hope to bring my experience from my time in the European Parliament to bear on the important discussions to come on Brexit.

For now, I thank the House for indulging me while I made my maiden speech. I look forward to making the voice of Manchester, Gorton heard loud and clear during my time in this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Mike Hill to make his maiden speech.

5.14 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech today. As the first person in my family to attend university—on a grant, a wing and a prayer—I know just how difficult it is to survive university, let alone be saddled with debts as a result of tuition fees.

I begin by paying tribute to those who elected me—the most wonderful, friendly, warm-hearted and welcoming people. It is an honour and a privilege to represent Hartlepudlians in this House. I should also like to pay tribute to the town's previous MPs—Iain Wright, Peter Mandelson and Ted Leadbitter. Sadly, I did not know Ted, but I do know that he was a true and much respected constituency MP, and that is something that I aspire to emulate. I thank Peter Mandelson for his energy and efforts in helping to regenerate the town, for throwing his weight behind some wonderful projects such as our most beautiful world class marina, and for flying the flag for that little known northern delicacy, guacamole.

[*Mike Hill*]

As for my immediate predecessor Iain Wright, who could ever forget his true tenacity and ruthlessness as Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee as he exposed the disgraceful and completely unacceptable exploitation of workers at Sports Direct, or his dogged determination to stand up for British Home Stores workers when they lost their jobs in the blink of an eye and during the pension scandal that followed? Yes, we lost our BHS in Hartlepool too—and yes, Philip Green deserved to lose his knighthood over it.

At the turn of this century, I had the good fortune to land a new job with the trade union Unison. Of all the places where I could have lived in the wonderful region of the north-east, I chose Hartlepool. As I said earlier, the people are warm and welcoming—straight-talking and honest folk. But they were not the only attraction. Hartlepool is a real hidden gem, a beautiful coastal town steeped in history. From Greatham to the Fens, from Elwick village to Hart village, from the prehistoric petrified forest seen at low tide at Seaton Carew to the medieval St Hilda's church on the Headland, there is history everywhere.

Robert de Bruce is famously connected with the town. It has sitting in a dry dock in its centre one of Nelson's original flagships, HMS Trincomalee. We have recently welcomed to the town the new Royal Navy museum of the north. The Heugh battery on the Headland, a survivor of the first bombardment of British soil from the sea in the first world war, is a hidden treasure. Hartlepool truly has a wonderful tourist offer, and I am proud to be here to promote it today.

My constituents are no fools—they know their own minds and speak plainly. They voted massively for Brexit; 69.5% was the highest vote in the north-east. But that did not mean that they were converts to UKIP or the Tories, as UKIP found out when it lost its deposit in the general election and as the Tories found out when we increased our majority. I thank the Prime Minister for deciding to go to the polls early. The fact that Hartlepudlians voted in the local football mascot H'Angus the Monkey as their first ever elected Mayor shows their humour and ability to challenge the establishment when they need to.

Unlike the monkey Mayor, I did not get elected for promoting free bananas for every primary school pupil, but I did on the promise that I would fight for those kids, for their schools, for the NHS, for our hospital and for our public services—and against the Government hellbent on breaking them. I pay tribute to all those who supported me in getting elected to this strange place—particularly to my family, who are with us in the Gallery, and to my mother and father, who passed away in February this year. My dad, Mr Robert Hill, from the other monkey town of Heywood in Lancashire, was a true inspiration and he would be proud of me today. Yes, it is true—I moved from one monkey town to another and became its MP. You simply could not make that one up, could you?

My experience here so far has inspired me all the more to do what I promised to set out to do. Hartlepool is a wonderful place, yet it has some of the most deprived wards in the country. Life expectancy for women is the second lowest in the country, and unemployment is significantly higher than in any other

town in the north-east. It is my job—my determination—to fight tooth and nail in this place against the constant attacks on our people and communities by the failed austerity agenda delivered by a Government who are disconnected and uncaring of our people and communities.

I want to champion and fight for mental health services—mental health is a growing issue emerging from austerity—and, as a former union official, for health workers, who themselves fall ill and often suffer a second-class service when it comes to their own treatment. I want also to champion and fight for the trade union movement and the co-operative movement. I am proud of my co-operative and union roots. I pay personal tribute to all my work colleagues and friends in Unison, particularly my secretary, Angela, and everyone at the Middlesbrough office, who are nothing short of family to me.

I also pay tribute to a true inspiration and giant of the trade union movement, Mr Rodney Bickerstaffe—my friend and the former general secretary of Unison. He is a brilliant man and working-class hero who is currently suffering from a terrible illness and is having an operation today; I wish him well.

I am unashamedly a trade unionist and my constituents know that. They also know that I am a tried and tested campaigner. I am privileged to have their support and to be able to do what I said I would do: fly the flag for Hartlepool, put the town on the map, and fight every inch of the way for the people who elected me.

5.21 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will know that I was not here for most of the debate, but I would like to join the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and send best wishes from this side of the House to Rodney Bickerstaffe, who I knew in my various roles. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his supporters on doubling the majority of his predecessor. The House will look forward to many more contributions from him. The less controversial ones will be welcomed, including his commitment to investment—private and public—in his constituency, and the more controversial ones may get a riposte later on.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) comes to this House as one of the best qualified people to contribute to our debates for all the reasons he mentioned in his speech. He is the sort of person who will give Parliament a good reputation. I hope he and we can co-operate, working across the House to achieve many of the things to which he is committed. I congratulate both hon. Gentlemen on their maiden speeches.

5.22 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Bury North (James Frith), for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on making excellent maiden speeches today. I came into the House with them and I am sure that we will carry on our journey together to help transform this country.

I have been waiting for 20 years to make a speech in a debate on higher education funding and tuition fees—ever since 23 July 1997, when Ron Dearing published his report and I was an executive officer at Leeds University union. In the past three months, I have spoken to

hundreds of students from the University of Leeds and Leeds Beckett University. Since Parliament dissolved, they were not aware that their fees were rising to £9,250 from £9,000. The fact was not made clear to them at all. The Government seem to have created a tuition fee rise escalator. In other areas, they are abandoning such escalators, but not for tuition fees. Fees are expected to hit £10,000 by 2020. I wonder how many students are aware of that.

The teaching excellence framework adds an additional element, starting an Olympic-style race with gold, silver and bronze medals awarded for quality. Future increases will be linked to the rostrum, creating a new hierarchy in higher education whereby gold medal-winning universities will be able to place their fees ever higher.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the average student now graduates with more than £50,000 of debt. The replacement of maintenance grants with loans also means that the poorest students are worst hit, whereas the richest 30% of households would have lower borrowings, at “only” £43,000. The poorest are hit hardest, the richest are hit the least and the middle are hit in the middle. Is that the sort of system we are trying to create? How much further does debt need to rise before the Government stop the debt spiral they created in 2012?

Graduates have raised the issue of loans with me consistently over the last period and before I was a Member of Parliament, because students currently repay loans at a rate of 9% of their earnings over £21,000. The repayment threshold was due to rise in line with earnings, but in 2015, after the previous general election, the Conservative Government froze the threshold until at least 2021. We are now seeing inflation rising but the repayment threshold staying the same, which is creating a real-terms increase in the payments. In addition, people have to deal with the high interest rate. We are talking about mortgage-style debt—this is not a short-term loan—but the Government are treating it like Wonga. Students are having to pay 3% above RPI; this is currently 4.6%, but in September, when the new academic year starts, it will go up to 6.1%. Why are students being lent money without fully knowing the terms that they will be repaying? Why are they totally at the whim of the economic climate and of the Government? A further irony is that graduates who earn more pay their loans back more quickly and incur less debt than those on lower incomes, who have to wait longer to repay their loans and are continually having to pay back interest.

So we have a quadruple whammy of rising fees, real-terms cuts in the threshold for when graduates have to pay back, rising interest rates and larger debt for lower-earning graduates. Has not the worst of all worlds been created? Students know that no aspect of this system is fit for purpose, and the general election showed just that, with many new hon. Members, some of whom spoke today and made maiden speeches, now representing university and student-heavy seats because students have lost trust in the Government. They know that the only party that will fix this broken system is the Labour party, with the action on both fees and loans outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

5.27 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I was lucky enough to go to Liverpool Polytechnic to study law in 1987 and have my tuition fees paid in full. I am sure many of the people here in this Chamber who went into higher education also had their fees paid. I do not know whether the prospect of having substantial debt at the end of my studies would have put me off, but it would have made me stop and think. That is the crux of the problem with tuition fees: many students from low-income families that might not even earn £20,000 a year would seriously baulk at the idea of having to pay back £50,000. With maintenance grants being replaced by loans, total student debt for those from poorer families will be much higher than for those from wealthier ones. It is therefore no accident that, on average, one in 20 freshers drops out from university every year, whereas the figure for those from poorer families is one in 12. Even when they graduate, those from poorer families earn 10% less than their wealthier peers, who find it easier to get placements and internships, and impress with CVs with better extracurricular activities. On the subject of jobs, it is also worth noting that many professions, including teaching and nursing, are struggling to recruit graduates, partly because of the low pay and the inability of graduates to pay off their loans.

Another invidious factor that arises from tuition fees and debt is that many young people are putting their lives on hold, as they have to live with their parents sometimes well into their 30s to save up enough money to buy a home of their own. That has a knock-on effect on their relationships and life choices, such as whether or not they want to start a family. It is not just young people who are affected by this; many potential mature students and part-time students have already been put off studying since 2012, when tuition fees were hiked up to £9,000. We have seen an overall decline of 61% in part-time students and 39% in mature students.

With the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating that average student debt is £50,000 on graduation, and with 77% of students expected never to pay off their loans entirely, it is scandalous that the Government are trying to increase tuition fees at this time. They should take immediate steps to reduce tuition fees, not increase them.

We have heard that Conservative Members question Labour policy on tuition fees, but if they wanted to debate Labour party policy properly, they should have voted for our amendment on Monday to give us more Opposition days.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Government’s decision to increase tuition fees implemented by the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1205) and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 1206).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I thank hon. Members for their self-denying ordinance. We managed, without a time limit, to come in almost exactly perfectly on time. In particular, I pay tribute to the people who have made their maiden speeches this afternoon and done so within the limits which Mr Speaker asked them to keep to. Thank you very much indeed.

Exiting the European Union: Sanctions

5.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and Sanctions.

May I congratulate those who have just given their maiden speeches?

The United Kingdom has long been one of the most networked and outward-looking countries in the world. The Prime Minister has set out her vision for the country, following our exit from the European Union: a truly global Britain—a country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike. We hold fast to a vision of a UK that is respected abroad, tolerant at home, engaged in the world, and working with international partners to advance the prosperity and security of our nation.

That said, we live in a fast-changing and uncertain world. The United Kingdom faces a number of threats from states that act in contravention of international law, from individuals who peddle messages of hate or commit acts of terror, and from companies that corrupt basic standards of behaviour, and this country needs as many tools as are available to counter these threats and to influence the behaviour of others.

Effective, targeted sanctions policy is one of those tools. Sanctions have helped resolve complex and serious policy issues—for example, by bringing Iran to the negotiating table to agree to robust constraints on its nuclear programme. The UK currently implements 34 sanctions regimes, around half of which result from legally binding resolutions of the UN Security Council, and half from additional measures agreed with partners in the European Union. We must retain the ability to impose, update and lift sanctions regimes, both to comply with our international obligations and to pursue our wider foreign policy and national security objectives after we exit the European Union.

The referendum result last year was a clear message from the people of the United Kingdom that we need to change our relationship with the European Union and take back control of our laws, and this Government are delivering on that instruction through the ongoing negotiations, the second round of which is under way this week, and through the introduction of essential legislation, such as the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, which the Government published last week.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): This mantra of taking back control of our own laws has been very prominent in the Brexit debate. Could the Minister give an example of an EU sanction that the United Kingdom would not want to apply, or of a sanction that it would want to apply, but that the European Union does not currently apply, just to give us some idea of how much control we need to take back in this area?

Mr Walker: I will respond to the hon. Gentleman perhaps later in my speech. This is more about powers than policy. The UK wants to pursue a consistent policy as we go forward, but to do so, we will need powers as we exit the European Union.

The UK's implementation of UN sanctions and European Union multilateral sanctions relies on the European Communities Act 1972. The UK has some limited domestic powers to impose sanctions—notably in domestic counter-terrorism—but these are not sufficient to replicate the full range of sanctions in force through the European Union. While the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will preserve or freeze existing sanctions, it would not provide the powers necessary to create new regimes, as we may need to in future, or to update, amend or lift sanctions, as we have done in the past when there are changes in circumstances in the fast-moving world of foreign policy.

When the United Kingdom exits the European Union in March 2019, we will therefore need to have new legislation in place. As set out in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech, the international sanctions Bill will be introduced this Session. The Bill will focus on powers, not policy, establishing the legal framework that we need to continue implementing UN sanctions, and to return decision-making powers on non-UN sanctions to the UK, while preserving flexibility, for now, on how we use those powers in relation to specific countries or threats.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Does not the Minister accept that what he has outlined of this process really does underline the stupidity of some of the arguments around sovereignty? He says that we can now impose our own sanctions regime, but we are less powerful and less influential acting alone than we would be acting through the European Union.

Mr Walker: I do not agree. The referendum clearly took the key decision that we would be leaving the European Union, but that does not prohibit us from working with allies in the European Union, or indeed elsewhere. The UK will continue to be a powerful, positive influence in the world, and we can work with allies on a number of planes.

Returning to the Bill, on 21 April the Government—the Foreign Office, the Treasury, and the Department for International Trade—launched a nine-week consultation, which closed on 23 June, on the United Kingdom's future legal framework for imposing sanctions. The consultation document was published online and sent to over 30,000 individuals and companies. Government officials also held roundtables to consult key sectors, including financial services, the legal profession, industry professionals and representative bodies, as well as international partners. The views of those who participated in the consultation have been carefully analysed by officials, and the Government response will be published shortly.

We intend to preserve important elements of our current approach to sanctions, using them in a targeted fashion to maximise the intended pressure while minimising unintended consequences. In line with the Human Rights Act 1998, we will designate people only when this is justified by evidence, and we will provide a framework for sanctioned persons to challenge their designations in a court. We will improve current practice where we can, using the greater flexibility we will have in future to provide guidance to UK businesses affected by sanctions and to grant licences to prevent sanctions from disrupting humanitarian operations. The Bill will ensure that the United Kingdom is ready, on exit day, to continue to

play a leading role as a global foreign and security policy actor. It will allow us both to meet our international obligations and to support our own foreign policy and national security.

It is clear that sanctions are most effective when agreed multilaterally with our allies and partners around the world. The more countries acting in concert, the greater the impact of sanctions and the less scope there is for evasion or retaliatory measures. UN sanctions are therefore the gold standard, as they bind the entire international community. However, as we see in relation to Russia and Syria, we also need to be able to work with the EU, the US and Canada, and other allies to impose sanctions outside the UN framework.

We cannot say with complete certainty at this stage what the precise form of our future co-operation with the EU will be, and what that will look like after the UK's exit. That will depend on the wider negotiations on our future relationship in the field of foreign and security policy. However, as the Prime Minister and others have said, there is a clear mutual interest in a deep and special partnership. We remain committed to European security and to working with our EU allies to counter global threats that we all face. Sanctions are an important means to that end, and the international sanctions Bill will ensure that we retain the necessary powers.

I welcome today's debate as an important opportunity for Members across the House to feed into the vision for a global Britain, and to discuss how our sanctions regime will operate after we leave the European Union.

5.39 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Sanctions are obviously an extremely important policy lever. People often think of sanctions as a modern policy instrument, but Thucydides mentions them as one of the instruments used against Megara in 432. Unfortunately, on that occasion they did not succeed in averting the Peloponnesian war. Sanctions are crucial nowadays, and it is vital that Ministers have the legal powers to implement sanctions policy in line with foreign policy objectives and responsibilities.

As the Minister has just said, the Government produced a consultation document on 21 April, and the deadline for people to respond was 23 June. The plan was originally that we would have a Bill before the summer recess, and I ask the Minister who will respond at the end of the debate: where is the Bill, and why have we not got it?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I may be able to help the hon. Lady. There was something called a general election that came along, and these things cannot be announced during purdah, so to have a proper response to the consultation, it is appropriate that we should prepare it during the coming few weeks and months. It would have been improper to have done so earlier.

Helen Goodman: I am not of course suggesting that the Bill should have been produced in the middle of the general election campaign, but it is quite clear that consultation responses were coming in during that period. As the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said, officials have been looking at the responses.

This is another example of the chaos and confusion that is evident on the part of the Government in the whole Brexit process. We had another example of that on Monday, when, without any explanation, Ministers withdrew the motion on a unified patent court. Across the board, policy is not being processed sensibly. These are not pieces on a chess board, but important areas of policy responsibility.

The consultation paper said that the legal powers we need to maintain sanctions will be put in the Bill, but it will not look at the policy goals or at how we will align future UK sanctions with those imposed by the European Union. I can understand the first part, but I really want to learn from Ministers whether the second part can be true. For sanctions to be effective, they must obviously be co-ordinated with our partners. Surely the way we make decisions to initiate and review sanctions must be explicitly linked with the processes of our partners in the UN and the European Union.

Hitherto in the EU, sanctions have often related to upholding values set out in the common foreign and security policy, including human rights, democracy, good governance and the rule of law. These should continue to be the cornerstones of our policy post-Brexit. I would be grateful to the Minister for Europe and the Americas if he confirmed that. The European Council has hitherto adopted decisions, together with any necessary regulations, and set out the elements of each individual sanctions regime. A number of UK Departments—principally, the Home Office, the Treasury and the Department for International Trade—have then taken on the responsibility for implementation. Will Ministers explain which Department will take the lead in co-ordinating other Departments on future sanctions?

In 1998, the Labour Government carried out a wide-ranging review of UK sanctions policy. When reporting to Parliament on the outcome of that review, the then Government outlined the core principles of sanctions policy: sanctions should be targeted to hit the regime, rather than ordinary people; they should include exemptions to minimise the humanitarian impact on innocent civilians; they should have clear objectives, including well defined and realistic demands against which compliance can be judged, with a clear exit strategy; there should be effective arrangements for implementation and enforcement by all states, especially neighbouring countries; and sanctions should avoid unnecessary adverse impacts on UK economic and commercial interests. We believe that these principles remain appropriate, and I would like an assurance from Ministers that they take the same view.

In the consultation paper, the Government state:

“Primary legislation will create a framework containing powers to impose sanctions regimes, the details of which will be laid out in the secondary legislation”.

That is somewhat vague. We seem to be being presented with a number of Henry VIII powers. We would be grateful if Ministers could tell us what the supervision and accountability arrangements with Parliament will be.

Assuming that the Bill creates a broad framework, and given the importance of ensuring that individual sanctions regimes are carefully calibrated, we believe that there is a good case for saying that all secondary legislation imposing UK sanctions should be subject to the affirmative procedure. In other words, new sanctions or changes to sanctions should require a debate on the

[*Helen Goodman*]

Floor of the House, rather than in Committee upstairs. That is the only mechanism that would provide the requisite parliamentary scrutiny and the opportunity for us to hold the Government to account.

We would also like to know what level of oversight will be built into the process of reviewing sanctions. The consultation paper says only that both

“UN and EU sanctions are subject to internal reviews...We propose a similar approach under our new legislation...Internal reviews by the Government could include periodic reviews of individual designations or of entire regimes.”

Obviously, sanctions regimes need to adapt to changing circumstances, so ongoing parliamentary scrutiny and independent oversight will always be necessary. We want Ministers to provide clarity on that, so that procedures for accountability and independent oversight are built into any new legislation. We would like the Government to publish an annual report on the implementation of the sanctions regime, and to give Parliament a role in periodic reviews of UK sanctions—for instance, by making the Government’s annual report the subject of debates in both Houses—as well as a role in re-authorising ongoing sanctions on a yearly basis.

It is really difficult for a meaningful debate on this issue to take place until we have more clarity on the extent to which future UK-EU co-operation can take place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has said. That is particularly true of decisions as to whether sanctions should be imposed in the first place. The case of Ukraine is a good example of why it will remain important for us to work with the EU in future. It serves as perhaps the most prominent recent reminder of how collectively imposed sanctions can still have a real impact outside the UN. Everybody knows that the UK played a key role in making the intellectual case for those sanctions, and that the UK undertook significant diplomatic efforts in the EU and at the G7. How will the Government ensure not just that UK-EU co-operation on sanctions continues after we leave the EU, but that we will maintain our ability to shape decisions on when the EU sanctions are imposed? [*Interruption.*] “We won’t,” mumbles the Minister. We will hear whether, instead of mumbling on the Front Bench, he can answer those questions at the end of the debate.

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that the hon. Lady will allow me to not mumble from the Dispatch Box. I was trying to alert her to the fact that most of those sanctions are imposed by the UN, to whose authority we are subject as a member.

Helen Goodman: As a matter of fact, the right hon. Gentleman’s colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, just said—I think this is right—that about half the sanctions in which we are involved are not subject to UN resolutions, but have come separately from the European Union. Given that the debate is about exiting the European Union and sanctions, it is reasonable to focus on the European angle.

The Government have set up their consultation and scheduled this debate, but they are not able to explain how in practice we will co-operate with our allies in the EU on issues such as intelligence sharing, policing and

judicial matters, and all the things that are needed to enforce compliance with sanctions regimes in an effective way. The lack of any plan is another example of the Government’s recklessness in threatening to use security co-operation as a bargaining chip in the Brexit negotiations. The role of the financial sector is likely to be key in implementing any effective UK sanctions regime, particularly in terms of tackling money laundering and terrorist funding. The size of the City of London means that our role is vital. We have a record of leading in this area, although concerns remain about money laundering and sanctions evasion.

A critical question concerns the extent to which any new sanctions regime will be applied to the UK’s overseas territories. Following the revelations of the Panama papers, it is clear that all the UK’s overseas territories could play a part in tracking down and clamping down on illicit finance. That applies especially to the Cayman Islands and British Virgin Islands, which have faced heavy criticism in the past, but also to territories such as Bermuda that are responsible for their own legislation in this area.

What is the Government’s assessment of whether sanctions are being adequately implemented and enforced in all UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies? Will the Channel Islands and Bermuda be responsible for their own legislation in this area under a new regime? What steps will the Government take to monitor implementation and enforcement in the overseas territories? Will they commit to reporting regularly to Parliament on this matter?

The question of sanctions is important and significant. It is a shame that we have not had more clarity from the Government today in the form of legislation, but I hope that when the Minister winds up the debate, he will be able to answer some of our questions.

5.51 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): It is with humility and excitement that I make my maiden speech representing the constituency of Saffron Walden, the jewel of Essex. I am honoured to serve the people of this beautiful constituency and hope I can repay the faith they have placed in me.

I am also burdened by the weight of expectation. You see, Madam Deputy Speaker, Saffron Walden has not had a maiden speech since Rab Butler’s in 1929. He held three of the great offices of state, but I am most proud that, as a Conservative Minister, he introduced the Education Act 1944, which gave every British child a statutory right to free secondary education.

I also pay tribute to my most recent predecessor, the right hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, who served Saffron Walden with distinction for 40 years. He is well known to many of us here as a former Deputy Speaker and one of the kindest Members to grace this House—the ultimate gentleman. He is much loved in the constituency, and I am forever grateful to him for being a brilliant mentor and helping every day of the campaign, come rain or shine. I am still bowled over whenever I remember that Sir Alan became a Member of Parliament 10 years before I was born. It has been a joy to follow in his footsteps—except when we were out delivering leaflets and I found myself consistently outrun by an 80-year-old man.

Like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to be an Essex girl. Saffron Walden is a great place and was judged the best rural place to live by no less than the *Daily Mail*. After seven years of Conservative-led Government, unemployment is at an all-time low of 0.7%, and 99% of children go to a good or outstanding primary or secondary school. We also boast the UK's oldest land college in Writtle.

The constituency covers rural Chelmsford and the major settlements of Thaxted, Great Dunmow and the medieval market town of Saffron Walden itself. It was called Saffron Walden because of its large saffron crop. The spice was worth its weight in gold and was used in medicine, in perfume and even as an aphrodisiac. Like the saffron crocus, I am not a native of the great county of Essex—I come from more exotic climes. While I may not have all the attributes of this versatile flower, I hope that I will equally take root in the area, bring prosperity to the local people and add some colour and spice to this Chamber.

Much has changed since then, but more change is needed—change to the rickety network on which mobile phones operate, change to the inadequate broadband service that has left parts of the constituency with little access to the outside world, and change to the railway line that has become synonymous with being late for work. We cannot claim to offer opportunities to rural areas if basic infrastructure is not provided. My constituents are more likely to get to Spain faster than London, because we have Stansted, the country's fourth-largest airport. It has brought jobs—and noise—and growth to the area on a huge scale, and has cemented my constituency's position as the epicentre of business, travel and wealth in Essex.

I am often inexplicably confused with a member of the Labour party—I cannot think why. I am a Conservative. To all intents and purposes, I am a first-generation immigrant. I was born in Wimbledon, but I grew up in Nigeria. I chose to make the United Kingdom my home. Growing up in Nigeria I saw real poverty—I experienced it, including living without electricity and doing my homework by candlelight, because the state electricity board could not provide power, and fetching water in heavy, rusty buckets from a borehole a mile away, because the nationalised water company could not get water out of the taps. Unlike many colleagues born since 1980, I was unlucky enough to live under socialist policies. It is not something I would wish on anyone, and it is just one of the reasons why I am a Conservative. I believe that the state should provide social security, but it must also provide a means for people to lift themselves out of poverty.

As a woman of African origin, I also believe that there is a lot that Africa can teach us. Sound money is not just a catchy phrase. The lesson of Zimbabwe is salient for us today. Money cannot be printed and redistribution cannot be successful without first creating wealth. Edmund Burke said that society is a contract between the dead, the living and those yet to be born. I say to colleagues who are wavering on tackling the debt and the deficit, “Hold your nerve.” This is part of that contract that we owe to our descendants. To leave our children carrying the burdens of our debt and excesses is morally wrong.

I believe in free markets and free trade. But there is more to conservatism than economic liberalism—there is respect for the rule of law; personal responsibility;

freedom of speech and of association; and opportunity through meritocracy. Those freedoms are being subtly eroded in an era when emotion and feeling are prized above reason and logic. It is those freedoms that I will seek to defend during my time in this House.

There are few countries in the world where you can go in one generation from immigrant to parliamentarian. Michael Howard spoke of the British dream—people choosing this country because of its tolerance and its opportunity. It is a land where a girl from Nigeria can move, aged 16, be accepted as British and have the great honour of representing Saffron Walden.

There are some in this country, and this Chamber, who seek to denigrate the traditions of this Parliament, portraying this House as a bastion of privilege and class, that “reeks of the establishment”, as someone said. It is no coincidence that those who seek to undermine the institutions of this island—Parliament, monarchy, Church and family—also propagate a world view that sees Britain, and the values we hold dear, as a force for bad in the world. Growing up in Nigeria, the view was rather different. The UK was a beacon, a shining light, a promise of a better life.

Often we hear the radical reformer John Bright misquoted as saying that the House of Commons is the mother of all Parliaments. What he actually said was that this country is the mother of all Parliaments. Our political institutions may not always be held in high esteem, but I believe that politics is a mirror held up to society. Yes, it can sometimes be unedifying. Yes, we see human weakness on display. But it also embodies much that is great in our country. When I walk down these corridors and stand in this Chamber, once graced by my heroes, Winston Churchill, Airey Neave and Margaret Thatcher, I am filled with nothing but awe, respect and pride for all that it stands for.

As Woody Allen said about sex, “If it’s not messy, you’re not doing it right.” The same is true of democracy. It is not always predictable; its results are not always elegant; it can throw up results that no one expected—but we adjust. The British Parliament always has adjusted, and that is why it is the oldest in the world: it takes its lead from the British people.

We live in difficult times and face historic challenges. People are rightly concerned about what Brexit will mean for the country, for their jobs and for their families. But I do not believe that winter is coming. I believe that the vote for Brexit was the greatest ever vote of confidence in the project of the United Kingdom: that vision of a global Britain to which the Minister referred. It is a project that, as a young African girl, I dreamed about becoming part of. As a British woman, I now have the great honour of delivering that project for my constituents in the greatest Parliament on earth.

6 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch). She made a fantastic maiden speech, and she is a great credit to her community. Her speech was delivered with verve and class, and a good deal of wit. While I may not have agreed with everything she said, I am sure that her contributions will be very welcome to the Chamber.

The world looks at the United Kingdom as the Brexit negotiations develop, to see how we will manage the situation in which we find ourselves, and what kind of

[*Hannah Bardell*]

relationship we plan to have with the European Union and, indeed, the rest of the world. Given that the UK is without a coherent strategy and seemingly bereft of ideas—and, as we have seen in recent photos, notes—I suspect that the external image of how things are going is not entirely positive. Our international reputation is on the line. SNP Members, however, welcome the opportunity to debate the real impact that leaving the EU will have on our international influence and clout.

There is a risk that after leaving the EU, the UK will be marginalised and diminished on the international stage. I know that no one in the Chamber wants that to happen, but there will inevitably be a reduction in our ability—if not a complete loss of ability—to impose meaningful sanctions on our own, or to make any meaningful contribution to a progressive international agenda. One of the Government's own colleagues, the former Foreign Secretary, has called for the UK to keep its seat on the EU's Political and Security Committee. I hope that the Secretary of State and his fellow Ministers will enlighten us as to whether he agrees with his colleague.

As has already been pointed out, sanctions rarely operate effectively in isolation. Success depends on a combination of dialogue, agreement and conflict prevention between various countries. Clearly, working with the EU presents a broader range of tools than would be available to the UK when operating alone. Giving up our seat at the sanctions table will see the UK lose the ability to apply sanctions with the same breadth and weight. It will also lose access to key forums through which to push for ongoing momentum and accord among fellow EU member states. There must not be any serious divergence from EU partners in respect of sanctions. The UK must not relax any sanctions that are materially more restrictive than existing or new EU sanctions, especially when the UK has significant trade with a particular country.

Many have expressed fears that the UK may be dragged on to the new United States President's rather unpredictable turf. For example, as President-Elect he severely criticised the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. If he were to impose new sanctions on Iran, there might be pressure on the UK—and our “special relationship”—to follow suit. The new President has also indicated that the US would ease sanctions on Russia. The EU's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, has indicated that the EU will not change its policy on Russia, even if the US does. The UK must do likewise. Leaning more closely towards an Administration led by Donald Trump creates concern for many. We must hear from the Government that they will continue to take their international obligations seriously, keeping fairness and decency at the heart of any new trade deals and sanctions policies.

As the largest trade bloc in the world, the biggest global aid donor and a notable international investor, the EU adds weight to the UK's foreign and security policy efforts. Commenting on the possible impact of Brexit on the EU's own sanctions policy, Dr Erica Moret at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva recently said:

“A Brexit-weakened EU sanctions policy is likely to intensify the need to employ other, more expensive, controversial or complicated forms of diplomacy, coercion or pressure. It will also likely

strengthen Russia's hand against Europe, as it benefits from a fragmented Europe with a weaker toolbox of security instruments at its disposal.”

Those comments are deeply concerning and should worry us all.

Indeed, a Foreign Affairs Committee report said that the United Kingdom's relations with Russia gave an interesting insight into trouble ahead for the UK acting alone on sanctions. The report concluded that

“it will be increasingly difficult to sustain a united western position on sanctions, not least if they become a bargaining point during Brexit negotiations.”

Our worry is that there is everything to play for, but also everything to lose.

We should all be concerned, because our international role and responsibilities extend much further than just Russia. On 4 April, the latest in a series of barbaric chemical weapons attacks took place in Khan Shaykhun in Syria. More than 80 people were killed and estimates suggest more than 500 were injured. Just this week in Brussels the UK was able to play a central role in imposing sanctions against those involved in that horrific attack. The EU's Foreign Affairs Council agreed on Monday that 16 individuals will be sanctioned, their movements restricted and their assets frozen. But after Brexit the UK will be diminished and we will have no clout to impose meaningful sanctions, resulting in the UK losing its opportunity to contribute to a progressive international agenda.

After Brexit the UK will need to establish the necessary independent policy development and sanctions design architecture, for which it has mostly relied on Brussels until now.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making some important points, but does this not underline the arguments she is making about the complexity of imposing travel bans, asset freezes and so forth, and stopping those who are the target of sanctions? Does this not underline the argument for a proper transition period in respect of our withdrawal? The suite of instruments the hon. Lady refers to are complex in nature, not least legislatively. I do not see how we are going to be able to complete the process of putting in place a framework that we can apply independently in the tiny timescale that we have before our scheduled exit from the EU.

Hannah Bardell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and think he may have been reading my mind, as will become clear from my next point.

If the UK Government cannot agree among themselves on a transition policy for Brexit and a deal, as we have seen this week with the vastly differing approaches of the Chancellor and the International Trade Secretary, I and others seriously doubt their capacity to design sanctions architecture, let alone agree on what and where those sanctions should be imposed. And even if they do, the effectiveness of UK-only applied sanctions will be severely diminished.

The UK Government's own White Paper sets out, in pretty stark language:

“The UK needs to be able to impose and implement sanctions in order to comply with our obligations under the United Nations (UN) Charter and to support our wider foreign policy and national security goals. Many of our current powers flow from

the European Communities Act 1972 so we will need new legal powers to replace these...It is not possible to achieve this through the Great Repeal Bill, as preserving or freezing sanctions would not provide the powers necessary to update, amend or lift sanctions in response to fast moving events."

And events are moving fast; we have a short period, so the Government need to think very carefully and give us a response on that transition period.

Any new legislation must be clear about how these powers will be developed and implemented and, further, what infrastructure and regulation will look like to support those new powers. Additionally, the Law Society of Scotland has raised a number of pertinent points in relation to the UK Government's White Paper. These points are significant because they highlight the complexity—as the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) has just said—and scale of the task at hand, not to mention just how many sectors and areas of competence will be impacted by exiting the EU, and the need for a new set of rules and regulations. It is clear that lawyers, accountants and consultants will be very busy over the next few years—and, no doubt, considerably richer. But what estimate have the Government made of the cost of training lawyers and accountants to deal with the new laws and regulations, and what provision has been considered for the teaching of the new regulations and laws at our universities, colleges and institutions? We need a workforce that will be ready to go when those new provisions arrive.

An interesting point about cross-border jurisdiction also arises on page 23 of the Government's White Paper. The Law Society of Scotland is very concerned about this. The White Paper identifies special advocates as

"barristers in independent practice of the highest integrity, experience and ability, from civil and criminal practices. They are bound by the ethical standards of the Bar Council."

I know that many in the profession would like clarity and assurances that special advocates should be able to be drawn from the ranks of not only the Bar in England and Wales but the Bar in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and from suitably qualified solicitor advocates in all those jurisdictions, but it appears that the UK Government have again—whether by accident or intent—failed to recognise at the most fundamental level that the devolved nations exist.

According to the Law Society of Scotland, the Government's proposed additional power to seize funds and assets in order to freeze them appears to be unrelated to the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. This therefore seems like a curious thing to sneak in. Will the Secretary of State clarify why this has appeared at this juncture? It concerns me and, I am sure, others that the UK Government would introduce new legislation that is potentially unrelated to the UK exiting the EU. This is not good practice, and we need to understand the rationale behind it. It is clear that the UK Government are going to have very little, if any, time in which to do their day job as they deal with the enormity of Brexit, but they have some serious questions to answer on how they will manage and develop their sanctions policy. It is key to our reputation on the global stage, and to how we will work with the rest of the world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I call Mr Andrew Lewer to make his maiden speech.

6.11 pm

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for her speech. It was comprehensive, but rather different in its thrust from mine. I must not pass up the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) on her excellent speech and to refer to the really great camaraderie that she and I and the rest of our intake have enjoyed. I am particularly fond of Saffron Walden as it is where my mother went to college. In fact, Rab Butler cut the ribbon at the opening of her college in 1965. I hope she does not get annoyed with me for mentioning the date.

I am truly honoured to have been chosen as the Member of Parliament for Northampton South. I have big boots to fill, in a town that is rich with an industrial history of manufacturing boots and shoes. There is not a place in the world where a British man or woman has not left their footprint with a Northampton boot or shoe, whether in a jungle or a desert, or on a mountain or a snow-laden plain. In 1830, there were 40 shoe and boot manufacturers in Northampton, and they employed a third of all the men in the town. That does not include the ancillary industries; they were employed in actually making the boots and shoes. The fortunes of the town's shoe and boot industry have risen, fallen and risen again. Although we are now left with only a handful of shoe manufacturers, they produce some of the most exclusive and desirable handmade shoes in the world.

My upbringing, most particularly at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in Ashbourne, taught me the value of tradition. Thus—and staying with the metaphor of footprints—I would like to acknowledge the work of the former Member for Northampton South, Mr David Mackintosh. Although his tenure was short, his impact and the footprint of his public service to this House and to his constituents were significant. When I recently visited the Hope Centre, a local homelessness and anti-poverty charity in Northampton, I learned that he was held in high regard there for helping to push through the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and for his local work on combating homelessness.

The Northampton South seat was established in 1974, and those who represented the constituency are still making their footprints on public life to this day. Lord Naseby sits in the other place and still has an involvement in local public life through his work with Northamptonshire county cricket club. Mr Tony Clarke, who succeeded Lord Naseby in 1997, was a passionate public servant and continues to be so today by educating the young adults of the town in the local further education college. Then there was Mr Brian Binley, who is well known to many here and still centrally involved with the regeneration programme, Northampton Alive.

Charles Bradlaugh, whose bust I walked past today, was a particularly famous Northampton MP. He was a radical, and I came across him many years ago when I was doing postgraduate research—he and Charles Newdigate Newdegate had some enormous debates across the House about the difference between taking an oath and taking an affirmation. Previous Northampton MP Spencer Perceval is also well known in this Chamber. It is interesting that speeches made about him in previous years referred quite light-heartedly to his fate. In more recent years, of course, that has changed significantly.

[*Andrew Lewer*]

When we think of Spencer Perceval now, we think of much more recent and tragic events, and about the continuity of the risks that people run when they enter public service.

Francis Crick, who—with James Watson—co-discovered DNA, which is now the driving force of so many scientific breakthroughs and discoveries, was from Northampton, but there are also less well-known people, such as Walter Tull, who played for Northampton Town football club and then for Spurs. He was the British Army's first black officer; he fought in the first world war but, after an incredible war record, alas he was killed in 1918. Margaret Bondfield, the first ever female Cabinet member, briefly served as MP for Northampton, so there are big shoes to fill indeed.

The constituency of Northampton South is the home of Cosworth, Travis Perkins, Barclaycard and Carlsberg. Those are prestigious brands and significant employers for the area, but I draw colleagues' attention to another business. Under the shadow of the Carlsberg plant is the Phipps brewery, which was recently re-established after years of dormancy—and a welcome return it is. Pickering Phipps II served as the Member of Parliament for Northampton from 1874 to 1880. In many ways, his brewery and Northampton—because of the tannins involved in shoe manufacturing—was responsible for the revival of recipes that gave birth to the real ale movement, which has been going from strength to strength since the 1970s.

Northampton is one of the fastest-growing towns in the country, and has been for decades—I noticed that all my predecessors made reference to that fact in their maiden speeches. As I will, they referred to the pressures on public services, challenges for the high street and the major issue of housing. With the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), I will be campaigning for new and better facilities for Northampton General Hospital to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding town. We need more housing, better transport infrastructure and a more focused regeneration effort. As championed by Northampton Borough Council and the county council, we need an emphasis on culture and heritage to bring new vitality to Northampton town centre.

I hope my time as a county council leader myself will be helpful for all that, but—and here is a link to the debate topic—just over a month ago I was a Member of the European Parliament in Brussels. I have been told—I keep saying it and no one has contradicted me yet—that I am the only person ever to have served as a council leader, a Member of the European Parliament and an MP. As an MEP, I specialised in culture, education and regional development and fought for things that matter to me, such as the possible continuation of the Erasmus+ programme, or the introduction of a home-grown successor if not.

Helen Goodman: A very good idea!

Andrew Lewer: I do not know whether that is in reference to Erasmus+ or the home-grown successor—don't answer that!

As an MEP, I also spent quite a lot of time working on the revision of the audiovisual media services directive, making the case for avoiding the unnecessary burden of

over-regulation while protecting freedom of speech. I was also particularly interested in religious freedom and highlighted the case of Asia Bibi, who lives under a death sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan. I hope in this place to continue the work I was involved in to try to save her from the terrible situation she is in.

I was a reluctant leaver, but I still believe it is the right choice for the UK. In many ways, the complexity of leaving, which we are discussing tonight, simply underlines how much of our sovereignty we had lost and reminds us all that our work here is about not only getting a good deal as we leave but being ready to innovate in policy areas that this House has not had the lead on, or even much of a say about, for many years. Trade, environment and agriculture are not just something on which we will get a deal, but something on which we will need to work and innovate for ourselves henceforth.

Finally, let me go back to the tradition of describing one's constituency as the most beautiful. Northampton certainly does have some beautiful buildings. It has a fascinating history, notably in the medieval period. It is my non-conformist and Methodist roots coming out when I say that much of its beauty lies in its industriousness, and that much of what makes the country as a whole great is to be found there. Much of what will challenge us as politicians in the years ahead can also be found there within its boundaries.

6.20 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow two such excellent maiden speeches. I congratulate the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) on her speech. We share a background and a love for the London Assembly, of which we have both been members, and for Nigeria; I sense that she shares not just my love for it, but my frustration that that wonderful country still faces so many challenges. I look forward to working with her over the coming years. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) on his speech. He has described his interesting and illustrious predecessors, but his track record, both in Europe and as an excellent council leader, augurs well for his future here. I am sure that he will be named similarly in future maiden speeches. I welcome them both to this place.

Today, we are here to focus on exiting the European Union and sanctions. I want to discuss both those things—together and slightly separately—because they are very connected. I reiterate the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), which is: where is the Bill, Minister? We have already seen the publication of the grand repeal Bill, but this Bill has a pretty important connection with that. We cannot do the one without the other, and it really sums up, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, the challenges of how we timetable and deliver on this hugely challenging programme for our Parliament over the next 20 months. The Minister's response to that from the Dispatch Box underlines the lack of planning that we have seen on the Public Accounts Committee, which I have had the privilege of chairing for the past two years, where we have repeatedly heard examples from permanent secretaries about the lack of planning—a deliberate policy.

For example, on 7 July, the permanent secretary to the Treasury confirmed, when questioned, that the Prime

Minister had said at several points that the civil service was not, as a whole, preparing for Brexit. On 13 July, Sir Martin Donnelly, the permanent secretary to the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, said:

“We were following the guidance given by Ministers, which was not to make contingency plans for this outcome.”

On 26 October, we heard from Jon Thompson, the permanent secretary and chief executive of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, of the eight serious areas that his Department has to consider now that Brexit is a reality. I will not run through them all, because it is not the main point of the debate, but let me just mention customs. He said that,

“we run £40 billion-worth of the benefits system in tax credits and child benefit...there is excise and the decisions to be made there...there is VAT...and the question of what difference this would make to direct taxes and state aid.”

He went on to list other big concerns.

Let me take HMRC as an example of the challenges that this Government, this Parliament and this country face as we move to leaving the European Union over the next 20 months. That Department is already going through huge change in its estate management, in its IT and in the way that it tackles and deals with taxes.

We all know that it takes about 18 months on a fair wind to make a major change to the tax system, which is why budgets are planned some time in advance for those technical points, and yet the permanent secretary and the chief executive of HMRC has listed to our Committee and to this House eight other serious areas of concern—more than one Government Department can realistically manage—and that is just one Department. I have to say that that permanent secretary was the only one who actually had a long list. Other Departments—I will not name them all—mentioned the discussions they were having, but nothing really concrete about how they were planning to implement our exit from the European Union.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady is making some pertinent points about HMRC and the challenges of the customs system going through a transitional phase when it is already creaking under the pressure. Does she not also share my concern that in constituencies such as mine in Livingston, a high proportion of staff who are highly skilled in such systems and processes will be lost because of the transition the Government are going through? If we put Brexit on top of that, it becomes a perfect storm that is about to hit us.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady makes an important point. If we add on the other changes in Government Departments—the DWP is going through some changes of property and where jobs might be—that poses a challenge. We face a challenge with skills in this country anyway, and we can add to that our exit from the European Union and the fact that we have so many unanswered questions about what will happen to EU citizens residing in the UK and others who need to come here. We heard only the other day that the NHS needs to bring in a large number of GPs from the European Union because we are unable to recruit in this country. Whatever one might have thought of these policies before, we are now seeing skilled people who are potentially unable to move to new locations and we

do not yet have a skills strategy to fill not just those gaps but the others we might see as we leave the EU. A perfect storm is perhaps a polite way of putting it; I could think of fruitier ways of describing it, but I will leave the fruity conversation to the hon. Member for Saffron Walden, who stretched the boundaries further than I will on this occasion.

I will not list every Department and its problems, but we have a long list if other hon. Members are interested in seeing it, given the challenges that each Department faces in its exit from the EU, the lack of planning, and the lack of joined-upness across Government. A problem in one Department, such as HMRC, will have knock-on effects in another, such as the Department for International Trade. We cannot see these things in isolation and there is not yet a coherent plan.

I hope that when he sums up the Minister can reassure me that what I am saying is not true, but the evidence we have seen in Committee suggests that this is the reality. As I have said, senior civil servants acknowledged that they were told very definitely not to plan for the leave scenario, which has put us very much on the back foot.

Chuka Umunna: Does my hon. Friend agree that this reinforces the need for proper transitional arrangements? We are talking not only about the time that will be necessary. It seems to me that all the points she has just made are an argument for this country remaining part of the customs union and part of the EEA—the single market—at least in the interim, as we make our way out of the European Union.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As we approach the summer recess—with only one Bill published for our exit from the EU, with no serious plans on the table, and with it becoming apparent that when we come back in the autumn we will not get going seriously until October—we are getting to a point at which we will not even have 18 months to get this show on the road. I am assuming and hoping that Ministers will work 24/7 over the summer to get us to a better place, but even then the timetabling of business through this House means that practically—whatever one’s philosophical view—this cannot be done in time.

I am not saying this because I am a remoaner or a doomsayer. I might have been very positive about wanting to stay in the EU, as was my constituency, but let us be practical about the reality. The delay in delivering the sanctions Bill is another of the many concerns.

It is important that I highlight the concerns of many of my constituents who are EU citizens about the uncertainty they are still facing. Even now people are phoning me or coming up to me in the street in tears because of their concerns about their future. We have heard some degree of certainty from the Prime Minister: she has told us that there will be a mechanism for those people already living here who are EU citizens to regularise their stay, but that will not be published until the end of 2018 and there is still no certainty about the costs.

I was a Home Office Minister, and much as I like to gloss the previous Labour Government as one of the best we have ever had, the reality is that the Home Office—then and now—faces huge challenges in the number of people going through its immigration system. I grappled with that as a Minister, and I did not solve it. We grapple with it as Back Benchers. I certainly do in

[*Meg Hillier*]

my constituency, where I have a high number of people going through the system. The idea that, between the end of next year and when we leave, all those who so wish will be able to go through a regularisation process is cloud cuckoo land. It is not surprising that those who can afford it are going through the long-winded process of regularising their stay, getting residency and applying for citizenship.

I spoke at the weekend to a constituent, an international banker who has children. It costs £300 to reach the first hurdle in the legal process. She told me, “If I’m not wanted here I might just leave.” For her, leaving is a real option as she could get a good job elsewhere. Other good, skilled people who have given up their lives in other countries to work in the UK and pay taxes feel like turning their back on us. Some who have been settled in the UK for 15 or 20 years, whose children have grown up here, are very concerned about what the future means for them. Despite the Prime Minister giving some words of comfort—late in the day, and I do not know why this could not have been dealt with before—we need to resolve this sooner rather than later.

Sanctions are the main thrust of the debate. I am strongly of the view that UK-EU co-operation needs to be maintained. I say that not because I am trying to rewind the clock on the referendum—much though this is not where I wanted us to be—but because of a simple question: where would we have differed from the EU on sanctions? There are issues with money laundering and our approach to big international questions such as freezing assets across boundaries, travel bans, trade, and market restrictions, which are but a small part of that approach.

The timetabling of a sanctions Bill to fit with the great repeal Bill is another practical problem. For three years, on behalf of the British Government, I negotiated home affairs at the table in Europe with 27 member states. It took long enough to reach agreement but it was possible. However, trying to enact our Bill and align us, where we would normally agree with our European counterparts, will be incredibly challenging. It will be difficult, at this pace, to write that into law.

We must be frank: this House is not very good at legislating. The Government draft legislation—often in a hurry, and quite a lot will now be written in a hurry—the House has little chance seriously to amend it but must instead pick on the bits we can most likely amend, and as a result it often does not hang together very well. We legislate in haste and repent at leisure, taking a long time to unpick things. That is not true in every case, but as Ministers or Back Benchers dealing with our constituents’ problems we have seen it often.

Would the UK seriously go it alone? No, I think we would not, and I hope the Minister will be clear on that. Why do we not find a way of maintaining the status quo, for a transitional period at least? I fear how the Bill will fit in when it eventually comes before the House.

I have some simple questions for the Minister. How do the Government intend to timetable the repeal Bill and the future sanctions Bill, ensuring that they can work together and there is no contradiction? It would be crazy if we ended up legislating on two separate issues related to Europe, only to find that they do not work together.

6.33 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I add my congratulations and best wishes to the hon. Members for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) and for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) on their maiden speeches. They spoke with enormous passion, and although their speeches were very different in style no one can question their commitment to their constituents. I welcome both of them to the House. I thought the Woody Allen quote was a reference to my attempts at cooking, but perhaps that says something about my sheltered upbringing.

Three different things could happen when the United Kingdom is no longer automatically bound by European Union decisions on sanctions. We can attempt to impose sanctions where the EU does not do so, but that will be a waste of time because no one will pay any attention. We can choose not to impose sanctions where the EU does so, but that will probably lead to our dealing with some very dodgy characters on the world stage. The most likely outcome, however, is that we shall allow the EU to take its decisions without any UK input and tamely and obediently follow suit. Even that is not without its risks.

I am hoping that when he sums up the Minister will tell us what assessment has been made of the legal risk of the United Kingdom imposing, on its own, sanctions that have also been imposed by the European Union. It seems to me that an aggrieved party who might be put off from taking on the European Union in the courts might see an individual stand-alone legislator as a softer target. What assessment has been made of the risk that the United Kingdom will find itself as the fall guy—being sued in the courts every time the European Union does something that the bully boys of corporate business do not want to take on the EU about? They might happily have a pop at one wee tiny island in the north Atlantic.

In his opening remarks, the Minister said that we wanted to work with other countries as well as the EU. He specifically mentioned the United States of America. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) has already raised some of the alarms on that. We have recently discovered that the President held a secret, unlimited, unrecorded meeting with Vladimir Putin at the G20. We do not know whether that was in the context of a possible trade deal or state visit—maybe the President just wanted to catch up with his unofficial election agent.

What happens if those talks, which were not talks, were about the United States being willing to ease or break sanctions against Russia? Where would that leave the United Kingdom? Our bestest pal ever across the Atlantic says, “Trade with Putin!” The European Union says no and our conscience has to say no. Can the Minister give an assurance that regardless of what crazy crackpot scheme Trump and Putin cook up between themselves, until the Russians have returned every last square inch of Ukrainian territory into the hands of the people and elected Government of Ukraine, there will be no lessening of sanctions by the United Kingdom unless that has been agreed by the entire European Union?

Another concern would be if the UK decided to impose sanctions but nobody else did. We have to remind ourselves that the United Kingdom is no longer a colonial power; the sun sets every day on the British

empire, which does not extend any further than the British isles. There is a real danger that, to prove some kind of political machismo, the United Kingdom will attempt to impose sanctions on countries for whatever reason and nobody else does. I was going to say that we would be made to look like a laughing stock, but it is a bit too late for that.

Can the Minister name a single example of a country where unilateral sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom would make a blind bit of difference? It seems to me that we are frantically, with a huge amount of hassle, taking back control of something. Attempting to exercise that control unilaterally and in an isolationist manner will achieve absolutely nothing, but it will incur significant expense and legal risk for the United Kingdom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston raised some of the comments made by the Law Society of Scotland. One of the things that it has identified is what would happen if the United Kingdom wanted to start, on its own, imposing sanctions on countries believed to be sponsoring terrorism—I will not mention the secret report on Saudi Arabia that the Government appear to have commissioned but now will not tell anybody about. Of course, there is no suggestion at all that the Saudi Arabian Government are involved in anything unlawful in Yemen or anywhere else. How could anyone possibly suggest that?

What steps are the Government taking to arrive at a legally sound definition of what a terrorist-supporting state actually is? If that is not clear at the beginning, the door is again open for us to be sued by any aggrieved party. I am reminded that one of the very few countries that Gordon Brown, the previous Prime Minister, used anti-terrorism legislation against was Iceland. That shows what can happen if a definition of terrorism is a bit too vague. I have never known Iceland to sponsor state terrorism, but Mr Brown apparently thought that it did.

I understand the need for the Government to talk positively and bullishly about every single aspect of Brexit, despite the fact that the majority of their own party voted against it in the referendum, but we need to be realistic. We need to be alert to the fact that the United Kingdom's trading position and international reputation could be at risk and its economy severely damaged.

The Minister chose not to name a single example of EU sanctions that the Government would want to lift or of where the United Kingdom would want to impose sanctions that have not already been imposed by the European Union. This appears to be yet another example of where the desperation to take back control has come before any sensible, intelligent consideration about whether in some cases control is better exercised by 28 nations acting together than by one tiny little island in the north Atlantic that thinks it can do it all by itself.

6.39 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is my first opportunity to welcome you to your new seat in the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is great to see you there.

We have had a useful and informative debate this afternoon, although it has been slightly shorter than we anticipated because of other important debates. There have been some helpful contributions from across the

House, including the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), who likened herself to her constituency's namesake, spice. I am certain that she has a wonderful future ahead of her in this House and that her constituents will be, rightly, proud of her today. The hon. Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) spoke of his pride in his constituency's boot-making heritage. His affection for his constituency was obvious and it was a treat to be in the Chamber to hear his maiden speech. Well done. I welcome both hon. Members to the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) spoke of the need for transitional arrangements. Surely this argument is all but over. There will be a transitional period, and I look forward to the day when a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and tells us what we all now know to be inevitable.

The debate has been helpful in that it follows the White Paper on international sanctions published in April, and precedes the introduction of the Bill. Are the Government considering adopting a similar approach to the other Brexit-related Bills announced in the Queen's Speech? My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked: where is the Bill? But perhaps this new approach is a welcome sign of a new and collaborative approach from the Government. Ensuring that Parliament has a sufficient grip on the Brexit process is important to the Labour party and to the country.

Many of our constituents voted to leave the European Union because they want this House to take control of our law making. It falls to MPs to take a tight hold of the process and not allow the Government to take decisions, grab powers or devise processes that exclude Parliament. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill proposes sweeping delegated powers but lacks effective oversight or accountability. This is fundamentally undemocratic and unacceptable. The Labour party will not wave through Bills that demean our Parliament in this way.

The House has yet to see the draft legislation on sanctions, but we hope that the Government are not developing a habit and do not put something before the House that seizes more powers for Ministers than is absolutely necessary. The start the Government have made with the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is bad and needs to change. It is not in the national interest to present poor legislation before the House and then get upset when the Opposition decline to support it. The Government should and must do better. Labour agrees that the vital issue of international sanctions must be resolved before we leave the EU. We recognise that and will not seek to obstruct the forthcoming legislation needlessly, but it is vital that we get the details right. This is too important to get wrong.

Britain needs the ability to act unilaterally when it is appropriate to do so, but when attempting to influence or restrict the capabilities of states such as North Korea, Sudan or Iran, it is the combined effort of many nations that may, over time, prompt the change we want. Britain's national security is enhanced by working with our European allies, and there is no reason this cannot continue after Brexit. The Government need to set out detailed plans for future co-operation between the UK and the EU. Any decision to impose new sanctions or revoke existing ones must be subject to adequate scrutiny

[*Jenny Chapman*]

and periodic review. The Government need to make clear how they intend to enable parliamentary scrutiny of decisions when the intention seems to be to make regular use of secondary legislation. Does the Minister agree that sanctions decisions ought to be subject to a debate and a vote in this House? Ministers must not be allowed to make it up as they go along. The decision to implement sanctions, or not, will have a significant impact on the UK's standing internationally, our relationships with other nations and our ability to influence. The Minister needs to reassure the House that there will be a process in place that is transparent, fair and accountable to Members of this House. Does the Minister plan to provide regular updates to the House on the impact of sanctions measures, and will this requirement be in the Bill?

It is clearly desirable for the UK to continue to work closely with the EU after we leave. Our ability to work together to impose sanctions, especially when the UN has declined to do so, is extremely important. We also need to maintain our ability to influence our EU partners, so that sanctions are as effective as they can be. With that in mind, do the Government intend these measures to come into force on exit day or might sanctions in the end form part of the now inevitable transitional period? The Government need to make it clear whether or not they plan to participate in common EU foreign and security policy, and, if so, what institutional arrangements they wish to put in place. The EU imposed tough financial sanctions on Russia following the illegal annexation of Crimea, including a total ban on imports of goods originating in Crimea or Sevastopol unless they have Ukrainian certificates.

My former constituency neighbour, Lord Hague, has said of sanctions on Iran:

"The ability to agree among 28 countries, sanctions that were also co-ordinated with the United States made an enormous difference to world affairs. Twenty eight countries left to their own devices would not have had identical sanctions, or brought Iran to the negotiating table. The ability to do that is very important."

The Government's approach to sanctions policy in the forthcoming Bill will be read as a signal of their intent to align or distance themselves from working with like-minded international partners. Do the Government want to work more closely with the US or to continue to align with Europe in a common foreign and security policy? If so, how? Do we want to negotiate continued permanent membership of the EU's Political and Security Committee, as Lord Hague has proposed, or do the Government envisage a looser parallel arrangement?

The Minister's face seems to suggest that he thinks these are big questions for a general debate taking place before any legislation is even published. However, these are the issues—the extent and nature of collaboration; common aims and means with EU and other nations; and the use of secondary legislation and the role of this House—that the Government must be able to answer to win the confidence not just of MPs, but of the country.

6.47 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I welcome you to the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I start by saluting two exemplary maiden speeches that we have heard today? My hon. Friend the

Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) made her maiden speech with great confidence, saying it was the constituency's first since 1929; I take it that was because Sir Alan Haselhurst had previously sat for Middleton and Prestwich. Of course I am slightly saddened that the population of Sir Alans in this House has reduced by one, but her speech was utterly charming and beautifully judged, and I can see, as can all of us, why those in Saffron Walden have so rabidly taken her to their hearts. I said "rabidly" by mistake; of course I meant rapidly. It may well be that her locally produced saffron aphrodisiac will soon be on sale in the parliamentary shop, and I would urge hon. Members to form a most orderly queue. Her good sense on economics is a message all in this House should heed. I congratulate her on the most perfect maiden speech.

I offer similar congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer), whom I have known as the most diligent MEP for the East Midlands. He remains local to the East Midlands now that he is a Northamptonshire MP. He has a passion for high-quality Northamptonshire shoes; may I assure him that I endeavour to be a loyal customer? None of that Italian stuff for me. We will also try to raise a glass, when we can, charged with either Carlsberg or Phipps. He can forever be proud of the maiden speech he made tonight.

As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said in his opening speech, the Government intend to continue working closely with allies to counter threats such as terrorism, conflict and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. An effective and targeted sanctions policy is a very important means to that end, and a global Britain will continue to use sanctions to influence the behaviour of others as part of a broad and internationally co-ordinated approach.

We currently implement over 30 sanctions regimes, targeting specific countries as well as terrorist groups. Most of these sanctions result from resolutions of the UN Security Council or decisions by the European Union. Typically, they involve travel bans, asset freezes, and financial and trade restrictions. UN and EU sanctions are currently brought into effect in the UK through the European Communities Act 1972. The House has heard about the principles we apply when imposing sanctions. There must be clear objectives linked to wider political strategy; solid justification; and careful targeting to maximise the intended pressure while minimising the unintended consequences. I want to reassure hon. Members that the Government remain committed to these principles.

Today's debate is about the principle of whether, once we have left the EU, the UK should establish a sanctions regime that allows us to replicate the sanctions powers currently deriving from our membership of the EU.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give a commitment that the 34 sanctions currently implemented will be exactly the same after Brexit?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are over 30, and the intention is to lift and shift, but all will be subject to statutory instruments of this House. This House might, if it were to use its numbers, reject them, but the intention is to remain aligned with the EU—with existing sanctions—so that we are in harmony with it.

Jenny Chapman: The Minister said that these measures would be subject to votes in this House. Am I to read into that that he intends them to be subject to the affirmative procedure?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will come to that in just a moment, if I may.

A sanctions Bill will enable the UK to continue to impose, update and lift sanctions in response to fast-moving events. The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will not be sufficient to do that, since we need powers to do more than simply preserve or freeze existing sanctions. The United Nations Act 1946 is also insufficient for UN sanctions, because in 2010, the UK Supreme Court ruled that it could not lawfully be used to implement asset freezes, and that additional powers were needed for measures of this kind involving any infringement of individual rights. In short, the sanctions Bill will enable the UK's continued compliance with international law after we leave the EU, ensure that, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the UK continues to play a central role in shaping UN sanctions, and return decision-making powers on non-UN sanctions to the UK.

As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary said, the Bill will focus on powers, not policy. As such, it might be described as a framework Bill. It will provide powers to implement UN sanctions and to impose UK sanctions independently or in co-operation with allies. The question of how we use those powers will be addressed later, when we introduce secondary legislation applying sanctions to particular countries. We are obliged to implement UN sanctions, but we will face political choices on how far to replicate current EU sanctions.

The Bill will take account of the consultation mentioned by my hon. Friend in his opening speech. We envisage four main elements: powers to impose sanctions where justified and appropriate; powers to ensure that individuals and organisations can challenge the sanctions imposed on them; powers to exempt or license certain types of activity that would otherwise be restricted, such as humanitarian deliveries and supplies, in countries that might have been sanctioned; and powers to amend and adopt regulations for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing.

Detailed scrutiny of the Bill can obviously come only once it is published. That is why we will have Second Reading, Committee, Report and so on, as this House always does. However, perhaps I can respond as rapidly as I can in the time I have—and I am running out of time—to some of the questions that have been asked, mainly by Opposition Front Benchers. “Where is the Bill?” was one question. We have a consultation. We have just had an election and purdah, and we need to consider the responses and then decide our final position. Only then can we publish the Bill—but we will do so. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) asked who will lead on it. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will take the lead on foreign policy, including sanctions.

On the question by the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) about whether the procedures we intend to adopt will be affirmative or negative, we note—this is very important for the efficacy of sanctions—that the delay involved with affirmative procedures can lead to asset flight before assets are frozen or caught.

We are considering this issue, and will respond in our consultation response, which will be published very shortly.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have no time; I am very sorry.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland asked about the overseas territories. The UK has responsibility for the external relations and national security of overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and we will continue our policy of ensuring that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies apply international and UK imposed sanctions. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is chairing regular meetings with the overseas territories and Crown dependencies on how best to achieve this end. We will include a power in the Bill for the UK to continue to legislate directly where appropriate.

It was suggested that we would lose the ability to be part of international sanctions development. I would say very clearly that I believe that we will not lose this ability. The Bill is intended to give us all the necessary powers to work internationally. We note that the UK, with its international allies, was a key player in securing the Iran nuclear deal. We will continue our constructive and productive relationship with our European and international partners after we leave the EU.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) asked about the legal risk of the UK adopting EU sanctions—in other words, our having a separate regime and doing this individually. The UK will take responsibility for the sanctions it adopts, including taking on legal risks. When working with the EU, we will take all necessary steps, co-ordinating sanctions and sharing information, to reduce the risk, and if the risk is not acceptable, we do not have to follow the EU.

There are some other issues that we have not had the chance to discuss, but I am sure we will do so on Second Reading and in further consideration of the Bill. On civil liberties, for example, there is a very delicate balance to be struck between using sanctions to counter threats such as terrorism and respecting due process to protect the rights of individuals.

Another issue is abuses and violations of human rights as a reason to impose sanctions. The Government are firmly committed to promoting and strengthening universal human rights, and holding to account states responsible for the worst violations. Indeed, during the previous Parliament the Government amended the Criminal Finances Act 2017 to allow law enforcement agencies to use civil recovery powers to recover the proceeds of human rights abuses or violations, wherever they take place, where the property is held in the UK. We also have powers to exclude from the UK individuals whose presence is not conducive to the public good, and we operate a watch list system to support this.

We know that innocent individuals and organisations can sometimes be inadvertently affected by sanctions. We hear reports of this, for example, from humanitarian organisations delivering assistance in countries subject to sanctions. We will do everything we can to minimise these unintended consequences. We will publish guidance to make UK sanctions regimes as clear as possible to the individuals and companies affected. We will have more flexibility to issue general licences to humanitarian

[*Sir Alan Duncan*]

organisations in order to cut bureaucracy and make it much easier for them to continue operating in the most difficult of circumstances.

The Bill will be published in due course, and the response to the consultation will come out soon. I urge the House to appreciate that as we look across the world and see the dangers of terrorism and misconduct of all sorts, having an effective sanctions regime is absolutely crucial to our foreign policy and to making the world a better place. Replicating a sanctions policy once we have left the EU is absolutely essential. If we did not do that, the world would be a poorer place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Exiting the European Union and Sanctions.

PETITION

Climate Change Objectives and Obligations

7 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to present a *petition on behalf of residents of Dulwich and West Norwood*.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of Dulwich and West Norwood, Declares that there is widespread concern that the Government is not on track to meet the fourth or fifth carbon budgets; welcomes the Prime Minister's continued verbal commitment to the Paris Agreement; notes that in order to meet the UK's commitment to achieve the carbon budget action is necessary; further notes that the Committee on Climate Change reported in June 2017 and concluded that the UK can successfully navigate the transition to a growing, low-carbon economy but new policies to deliver that transition are overdue; and further notes that much domestic legislation for reducing emission and tackling climate changes is neither contingent on the UK's membership of the European Union or ends in around 2020, including but not limited to the levy control framework supporting low carbon power, fuel efficiency standards for new cars, renewable heat incentives, capital funding for flood defences to protect homes and businesses, and targeted biodiversity plans to help build the resilience of the natural environment to climate change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to lay before the House their plans for meeting the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, as well as committing to protecting existing environmental protections.

And the petitioners remain hopeful and expectant that this request is granted, etc.

[P002046]

Tesco House, Cardiff: Job Losses

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Stuart Andrew.)

7.1 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the closure of the Tesco customer operations centre in my constituency of Cardiff North with the loss of up to 1,100 jobs. If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall do three things: first, highlight the way in which Tesco has acted; secondly, describe the human impact of these actions; and finally, explore how we respond to these things and the next steps.

On Wednesday 21 June, without any warning or consultation with either the Welsh or the UK Governments, Tesco announced it would be closing its customer contact centre in Cardiff in February next year, leading to the loss of up to 1,100 jobs, with the possible relocation of 150 of those jobs to Dundee. The centre deals with inquiries from consumers all over the UK, including those made via social media. It has a highly motivated and skilled workforce who take great pride in their work.

On the morning of 21 June, staff went to work as usual. On arrival, some were told by visiting management to clear the top floor and find somewhere else in the building to work. An events management company had been brought in to install a PA system. Staff then received an email inviting them to a meeting on the top floor at 1 pm. To those crowded into that room on the top floor, an official statement was read out telling them they would all be made redundant. There was no opportunity for questions. This shock announcement has inevitably had a huge impact on the dedicated staff, some of whom have worked there for over 20 years. In some cases, two or three members of the same family work there.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my disgust at the fact that many of the employees, including constituents of mine in Caerphilly, only learned about the closure on social media?

Anna McMorrin: Yes. Some staff members who were not there that day only actually found out that they had lost their jobs through social media. There also seems to have been no formal means of contacting them or managing their concerns.

Following the announcement, I met Tesco executives to press them on their reasons for the job losses and why jobs in Dundee have seemingly been prioritised over jobs in Cardiff. We were told that there is more space in Dundee and that the company had already taken the decision to have one site where customer relations staff would be based. They were unable to provide any reason why they had not entered into discussions with either the UK Government or the Welsh Government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I, too, have constituents who have been affected by this absolutely absurd decision. Does she agree that it is completely bizarre for Tesco to not provide those reasons, particularly when Cardiff has gained a reputation

as an excellent place for customer care centres? Many different companies choose Cardiff because of the excellent skilled workforce there.

Anna McMorrin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I think that these job losses are the latest in a string of cuts implemented as part of the so-called turnaround plan by Dave Lewis, the group chief executive, who joined Tesco in autumn 2015.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, job losses on this scale will be felt keenly not just in Cardiff but across south Wales. A constituent of mine who works for Tesco contacted me, saying:

“I believe that what they (Tesco) have told the press is incorrect as I know they are outsourcing parts of their business to a site in Bury.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that the company should be questioned on that, too?

Anna McMorrin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it should be questioned on that, and I will address the issue later in my speech.

In his first year in charge as the group chief executive, Mr Lewis axed nearly 5,000 head office staff and UK store management jobs, as well as more than 4,000 roles overseas and at the group’s banking division. More than 2,500 jobs were lost with the closure of 48 so-called underperforming Tesco stores, and 3,000 jobs were put at risk in April when the chain cut night shifts for shelf stackers in some of its biggest supermarkets.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour for securing this debate. According to last year’s Tesco accounts, the chief executive, Dave Lewis, was given a £4.15 million pay package, of which £2.4 million was a bonus. Does my hon. Friend agree that he could have taken a little bit less and the company could have kept a few more of those jobs? Every little helps.

Anna McMorrin: I think it is absolutely the case that the company is prioritising management over the hard-working workforce, who are highly skilled and motivated.

I suspect that nearly every Member of this House has a Tesco store in their constituency. It is one of the UK’s biggest and most recognisable brands, with a loyal customer base.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House. Does she agree that there is something obscene about the loss of 1,100 jobs at the customer contact centre at Tesco House in Cardiff? On behalf of Tesco employees in my constituency, I register my support for her campaign. Does she agree that we should ask the chief executive officer of Tesco to reconsider his decision immediately?

Anna McMorrin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support.

In his desire to achieve more savings, Mr Lewis needs to understand that he has an absolute responsibility to treat his employees fairly and with respect. He owes them a duty of care and he should listen to what his staff are saying.

In the days following the announcement, I went to the customer centre to meet the staff affected, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and my local Assembly Member, Julie Morgan. The staff are utterly devastated and feel let down by a company to which some have dedicated their working lives. One staff member told me:

“We had felt like we were part of one big family and took pride in coming to work. This feels like being dumped like an old pair of shoes after being promised a secure future. Now we are feeling exploited and used.”

Some of the worst-affected households are those with multiple members losing their jobs. Some families will lose two, three or even four wages from their budgets. One couple in their late 20s who had their first child less than a year ago are both set to lose their jobs.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Following the coalition Government’s halving of the statutory consultation period from 90 days to just 45 days, the employees whose whole lives will be devastated by these redundancies have just 45 days to find another job in a small area where there will be more than 1,000 redundancies. Does my hon. Friend agree that 45 days is far too short a period for employees to find alternative jobs and for companies to look at straightforward alternative business proposals to fulfil their duty to consult properly with staff and look at real alternatives to keep those jobs in place?

Anna McMorrin: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about that, which is precisely why I brought this debate to the House.

One worker told me:

“We are absolutely devastated as my fiancée is currently on maternity leave with the birth of our baby daughter. We have also planned to get married next year so this news has come at the worst possible time for us in our lives and we are very worried for the future.”

Another staff member contacted me on Facebook. He said:

“It’s been stressful for a lot of us, some more than others. I’ve been made aware that there are options to apply for a store role or to move to the Tesco site up Dundee. This is not an option as it’d be too much of a drastic life change and there are very few roles considering the number of employees in our centre. The announcement has also left me wondering, if I moved to another role in the business, would I be any less vulnerable to another redundancy announcement in future.”

He went on:

“A lot of my colleagues whose time at Tesco exceed 10 years are choosing to stay until the end for their redundancy package as they’ll get a significantly larger amount but for many employees like myself who have been with Tesco just a little over a year, we see no incentive in staying as I don’t feel valued as an employee anymore and barely feel like I’m part of the place now.”

The morale has dropped rapidly on my work floor whereas it felt like a small community only a year back, and now it feels very empty and makes me feel quite down whenever I’m in the environment. I used to love coming to work but now the hours feel longer and it just feels like it’s getting in the way of the hours I could be using to find progression in life.”

Those are just a few of the many messages I have had from distraught members of staff who have been affected.

What is going to happen now? The Welsh Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, Ken Skates, has announced the formation of a taskforce to find new employment opportunities for the staff. That is a welcome development. It will pool the knowledge and resources of key partners to ensure that the 1,100 people

[*Anna McMorrin*]

currently working at the centre are provided with the very best support in seeking further employment, as well as welfare and emotional support. Following my question to the Leader of the House on 22 June, I ask the Minister before us to urge the Department for Work and Pensions to work with the Welsh Government and dispatch its emergency taskforce to help ensure that the staff who are affected are fully supported.

While that work goes on, along with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, I will be making the case for Tesco to rethink its plans and for better engagement with its workforce. If there is to be any outsourcing of jobs, at the very least I would like an assurance from Tesco and the management that they will go to companies based in south Wales.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time. When she and I met staff at Tesco, the point about outsourcing was raised. We heard that work had been outsourced for the past 12 months and that when people left Tesco House, they were not being replaced. Does she share my concern about the lack of transparency from Tesco management about where the work is going, because the number of jobs being lost and the jobs being offered in Dundee simply do not add up?

Anna McMorrin: I agree with my hon. Friend: there has been no transparency on this issue, and that is what I would like to see. I call on the Minister to request it.

I reiterate my deep disappointment at the way Tesco has handled the situation. I struggle to understand its rationale for losing such a highly dedicated workforce. As a company that supposedly values its workers, it should not want to lose decades of experience and the specialist skills staff have acquired. We all know Tesco, we have all shopped there. It has a loyal customer base in Cardiff and its staff deserve more and better than this. I hope that the Minister will join me in condemning this behaviour and work with me and alongside the Welsh Government in making the case to Tesco to rethink its plans and offer better engagement and more transparency to the workforce.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I welcome the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) to her place and congratulate her on initiating this important debate.

These are worrying times for Tesco staff at the Cardiff customer engagement centre and their families—especially those families with more than one person employed there—and I am sure that all our thoughts are with them. As the hon. Lady said, at 1 o'clock on 21 June, before it was officially announced at 2 o'clock, Tesco notified its staff of its intended plans to simplify its customer services operation by expanding its office in Dundee and—sadly—closing the centre in Cardiff by February 2018. I know that the hon. Lady tweeted, shortly after Tesco told its staff, about how shocked she was to learn of the proposed closure, and raised the issue with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House during business questions.

A 45-day consultation with the unions has begun. The Government's focus is to support all those affected and to get people back into work as quickly as possible through Jobcentre Plus. I can assure the hon. Lady that we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the maximum service is available.

Ruth George: I wish to make the same point to the Minister that I made to my hon. Friend. The period of statutory consultation, even for such enormous job losses, has been halved from 90 days to 45 days. Whatever support the DWP and Jobcentre Plus can put in is very welcome, but 45 days is far too short a period for so many jobs to be found in a city such as Cardiff. Although Cardiff has good employment levels, 1,200 good jobs cannot be replaced in such a short time. Will the Minister look at reviewing that halving to assist companies in supporting their employees?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I did note her earlier remarks. I do not think there is any prospect of reversing that decision. I accept that it can prove difficult for people to find alternative employment within the 45 days, but a lot of support is going on in Cardiff, not just from the DWP and the Government but from the Welsh Assembly. It is a buoyant economy and I hope that people will find satisfactory employment within that timeframe.

It is not always easy to find another job, and even if people do so it does not alter the hurt they feel at the rejection that redundancy always involves. But business change is an inevitable consequence of competitive markets, and retail is a highly competitive market at the moment. Commercial and economic opportunities and threats mean that companies will need to reorganise, merge, expand and, sometimes, unfortunately contract in response. To ensure businesses remain viable and profitable, they need the flexibility to respond to the circumstances they are facing as best they can. At the same time, employees will want to know how the changes are likely to affect them, and what their options are for the future. It is vital, therefore, that there is effective consultation with employees about the potential for collective redundancies.

Jo Stevens: Is the Minister aware that this is the largest single number of job losses that has been announced in Wales for a decade? About 100 of my constituents are affected by the decision, and they will be very disappointed that the Minister batted away the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) about the consultation period. Will she please reconsider, and talk to her Cabinet colleagues about the issue?

Margot James: Let me reassure the hon. Lady. The fact that this is the worst case for 10 years points to the buoyancy of the economy in Wales. That part of the country is doing well. When I visited it just two months ago, I was very impressed by the dynamism that I found in Cardiff and the surrounding area. I do not share the hon. Lady's pessimism about the opportunities for people. However, as I said earlier, I certainly appreciate that it is not a simple case of getting another job and all is well, particularly when a whole community is affected as this community has been.

Let me say something about the legislation. Collective redundancy legislation strikes a balance between the needs of the business and the needs of employees. It applies when 20 or more employees are made redundant at one establishment within 90 days. In those circumstances, employers have a statutory duty to consult employees' representatives about the proposed redundancies. The consultation must be with the employees' trade union representatives, or with other elected employee representatives when there is no recognised trade union. It must be completed before any dismissal notices can take effect, and it must be undertaken with a view to reaching agreement, although sometimes—I recognise this—agreement may not be possible. It must include consideration of ways of avoiding redundancies in the first place, reducing the number of people to be made redundant, and importantly, mitigating the effect of the dismissals. Employers also have a number of obligations, including a requirement to notify the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy of the proposed collective redundancies before the start of the statutory consultation.

Redundancy can be—and usually is—a stressful time for those affected. I want to highlight the service offered by the ACAS helpline, which can advise people on their particular circumstances. ACAS has also produced a guide for employers on handling large-scale redundancies such as those that we are discussing this evening.

Let me now say something about the support that is available to employees who are made redundant. Throughout the redundancy process, employers still have obligations to their employees, and should be thinking about the help that they can offer at all times. Employees with at least two years' service who have been given notice of redundancy have a right to reasonable time off so that they can look for a new job or arrange training. The Department for Work and Pensions and the local Jobcentre Plus have already been in touch with Tesco to offer their support.

I recommend that, in the case of redundancies, employers should always contact Jobcentre Plus as soon as possible to discuss appropriate support that can be delivered locally. All decisions about appropriate support are made locally, because a decision based on a specific redundancy situation, an individual's own transferable skills and experience, and the availability of jobs in the local area is far more likely to be the right decision.

Anna McMorrin: Does the Minister agree that these are not normal redundancy circumstances? Does she agree that the DWP should dispatch the emergency taskforce to help those affected to seek new employment, and work with the Welsh Government as well?

Margot James: I very much agree with what is behind the hon. Lady's intervention. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is taking that forward, and has already met the chief executive. The south-east Wales district Jobcentre Plus will deploy its redundancy response action plan, which includes working with partner organisations such as Careers Wales, the Welsh Government, the National Employer Partnership Team, the local authority, DWP pensions and Tesco trade unions to deliver a bespoke package of support, which I think is what the hon. Lady is after. The typical support provided for individuals is matching people to local

known job vacancies and/or helping to construct or improve CVs. Where there is scope to do so, support can be delivered on a group basis, for example by bringing redundant workers and employers together at a jobs fair as well as at group sessions and one-to-ones on site, to provide support and information on benefits, pensions, support from DWP and Careers Wales. Matching current vacancies to the skills and requirements of the affected individuals is a key part of the service Jobcentre Plus provides. This has been successful in many other redundancy situations.

Tesco has assured Government that its first priority is to do everything it can to support its colleagues in Cardiff, including helping them to find roles within Tesco, working with Jobcentre Plus, USDAW and the Welsh Government, and connecting with other local employers who might have vacancies.

Jo Stevens: One way in which Tesco could assist these staff members is not to make them redundant six weeks before they qualify for their annual bonus payment. Does the Minister agree that such behaviour should be discouraged?

Margot James: I am very sympathetic to that point; that seems to add insult to injury. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has raised that issue with the chief executive of Tesco, and I am sure he will raise it again thanks to the hon. Lady's intervention.

The Welsh Government have already established a taskforce, which stands ready to support the Cardiff workers once the outcome of the consultation is known. It is being led by Ken Skates; Fiona Jones, DWP's director for Wales work services, is a member of the taskforce, too. Tesco has confirmed that it will also work closely with the Welsh Government on its redundancy action scheme—ReAct—a programme that funds training for people living in Wales who are facing redundancy. Tesco will be engaging with the Welsh Contact Centre Forum and will be keen to reach out to other employers who might have vacancies. A significant number of businesses have already approached both Tesco and the Welsh Government, but the current focus has to be on the ongoing consultation process before any detailed discussions can progress with other companies. At present, Tesco is not able to provide specific details on the package available to staff, as this will be considered as part of the ongoing 45-day consultation.

In conclusion, I reiterate that retail is a vital sector for the UK economy and we are committed to it.

Anna McMorrin: Will the Minister join the Leader of the House in condemning the way in which Tesco made this announcement? When I asked the Leader of the House about this shortly after the announcement, she was appalled at the way things had been done.

Margot James: I do not think I would go as far as to condemn that, because I believe Tesco made every effort to inform people on a one-to-one basis. Some people were away. [*Interruption.*] If I am wrong about that, I apologise, but the information I have had is that Tesco did make every effort. Some people were away; it did contact them. It is appalling that some people found out about this on social media—and the situation in the Chamber lighting-wise has slightly thrown me off.

[Margot James]

I know that the fact that retail is highly competitive and buoyant will be of little comfort to Tesco workers at the Cardiff customer engagement centre who are facing an uncertain future. Every collective redundancy situation involves individuals, and their needs need to be managed carefully. It is vital that individual workers receive the information and support that they need, as and when they need it. This Government and the Assembly in Wales stand ready to provide every possible support to the hon. Lady's constituents and those of other Members representing the Cardiff area. I wish them all the very best in their search for new employment if the redundancies go ahead.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for the unusual nature of this point

of order, just before the question is put. Have you or Mr Speaker had notice of any statements, written or otherwise, to be made tomorrow by the Secretary of State for Transport relating to crucial decisions in Wales on St Mellons parkway station in my constituency and to the worrying rumours about rail electrification in south Wales?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am not aware of any notification of statements, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that if he has not heard anything by tomorrow there will be an opportunity to raise the issue, perhaps during business questions.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

House of Commons

Thursday 20 July 2017

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: On today's Order Paper it is noted that on 30 August 1917, Lieutenant the hon. Francis Walter Stafford McLaren, Royal Flying Corps, Member for Spalding, died of injuries sustained after his aircraft crashed during a training flight off the coast of Scotland. We remember him today.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Brexit: Environmental and Animal Welfare Standards

1. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What plans he has to ensure that (a) environmental and (b) animal welfare standards are maintained after the UK leaves the EU.

[900586]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill will convert the existing body of EU environmental and animal welfare law into United Kingdom law. The Government have made it clear that we intend, as a minimum, to retain our existing standards of environmental and animal welfare once we have left the EU. We have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world and I intend us to remain world leading in the future.

Vicky Ford: In Chelmsford during the recent election, more constituents wrote to me about animal welfare issues than about all other issues put together. People care, and British farm standards on animal welfare are world leading. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that British farm standards are not undermined by cheaper, less welfare friendly products from other parts of the world after we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her election in Chelmsford and also thank her for her dedicated work in the European Parliament on many of these issues. I, like her, received many representations from constituents about these issues, and my commitment is clear: while we want to lead the world in free trade, we also want to remain a world leader in animal welfare. There will be no compromise on our standards as we seek to ensure that we pilot a better position for British farming and British trade in the future.

15. [900600] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Fine words, but our bee population requires more as the research published in the peer review journal *Science* demonstrated just a few weeks ago. Will the Secretary of State today pledge to end the use of neonicotinoids in the UK and tell us whether the precautionary principle adopted by the European Union will be transposed into UK law?

Michael Gove: I share the hon. Gentleman's commitment to ensure that our bee population and our pollinators are protected. I pay close attention to the science in that report, and we will ensure that our policy on neonicotinoids follows existing EU protections and is enhanced in line with the science.

14. [900599] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, which categorises animals as sentient beings, will be part of the repeal Bill?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. Before we entered the European Union, we recognised in our own legislation that animals were sentient beings. I am an animal; we are all animals, and therefore I care—[*Interruption.*] I am predominantly herbivorous, I should add. It is an absolutely vital commitment that we have to ensure that all creation is maintained, enhanced and protected.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and thank him for his visit to Wakefield during the recent election. He can rest easy in the knowledge that he played some small part in my return to this place.

The UK's participation in the EU's registration, evaluation and authorisation of chemicals, or REACH, regulation system allows us to protect the environment and human health, and allows UK businesses to sell exports worth £14 billion to the EU each year. It is our second biggest export after cars. The Environmental Audit Committee's inquiry into the future of chemical regulation heard that the legislation cannot be cut and pasted. There are severe concerns about market supply chain freeze and regulatory disruption. How will the Secretary of State regulate chemicals when we leave?

Michael Gove: Better.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I do not envy the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs the task of transcribing legislation, because 80% of what it deals with is at a European level. However, is it not the case that there are important stakeholders, such as the water industry, that are quite clear that they want the whole canon of legislation to be transcribed as it is into national law?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. She was an outstanding Secretary of State in this Department, and the leadership that she continues to show in this area is outstanding, too. She is absolutely right: we want to transcribe and read across existing protections, including the precautionary principle, and then enhance them as and when appropriate.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Reports this week show a massive rise in US-style mega farms, suggesting that the industrial farming seen in the US is coming to the UK. What is the Minister doing to resist that trend?

Michael Gove: We need to be aware that there are always forces that will lead some small farmers occasionally to want to co-operate with others—to meet capital investment requirements, for example. One thing is clear: I do not want to see, and we will not have, US-style farming in this country. The future for British farming is in quality and provenance, maintaining high environmental and animal welfare standards. We have a world-leading reputation based on doing things better, and that will not be compromised while I am in this Department.

Leaving the EU: Farming

2. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What assessment he has made of the opportunities available for the farming industry after the UK leaves the EU. [900587]

4. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What assessment he has made of the opportunities available for the farming industry after the UK leaves the EU. [900589]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Leaving the EU presents a major opportunity for UK agriculture. We will be able to design new domestic policies that benefit British agriculture, the countryside and the environment. We have announced our intention to introduce an agriculture Bill in this parliamentary Session in order to provide stability to farmers as we leave the EU. We have pledged to work with industry to devise a new agri-environment system, to be introduced in the following Parliament.

Robert Courts: One of the most promising opportunities after we leave the EU will be to expand the range of markets available to our farmers, but that will come with corresponding challenges. Will the Minister please explain what the Government propose to do to open the new markets that will be available to the farmers of west Oxfordshire while maintaining our high standards, which are not always observed in other parts of the world?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Since 2015, DEFRA has opened around 160 new markets to quality British foods. In the future there could be opportunities to export more British produce, particularly meat and dairy. However, as the Secretary of State has made clear, we value our high standards in food production and animal welfare, and they will not be compromised as we develop future trade agreements.

Luke Hall: Does the Minister agree that once we leave the European Union we can adopt a new, more effective and more tailored agricultural policy that will benefit farmers in south Gloucestershire and right across the country?

George Eustice: I very much agree. One of the great opportunities that we will have after leaving the EU will be the ability to design more effective and better targeted domestic policies to support our environment and promote productive farming.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that the role played by the massive farming base in Northern Ireland—pigs, poultry, grain and dairy—must be utilised and enhanced? What discussions have taken place with the Ulster Farmers' Union on the needs of the farming community post-2019 and vital subsidies?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. Agriculture is very important to the Northern Ireland economy—its dairy and poultry sectors are particularly strong. I have previously met the Ulster Farmers' Union leaders. Indeed, I met one of the dairy companies from his constituency only yesterday. This Saturday the Secretary of State is planning to meet the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Mr Speaker. Farming and crofting leaders in Scotland hope that agriculture will be fully controlled in Scotland post Brexit, and according to fishing leaders the Secretary of State has intimated that the Scottish Government will control fishing to 200 miles—incidentally, Na h-Eileanan an Iar is probably the only constituency to reach 200 miles of the exclusive economic zone. Therefore, can I have it on the record that the Government will indeed be back in this position and that farming and fishing for Scotland will be controlled in Scotland post Brexit?

George Eustice: Some of these matters are obviously already devolved. I think that everybody recognises that there also needs to be some kind of UK framework to protect the integrity of the UK single market. On leaving the EU, we will take control of our agriculture policy, and there is an opportunity to give all the devolved Administrations more control than they currently enjoy to be able to do that while protecting the integrity of the single market.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that after leaving the EU we must have a risk-based regulatory system based on sound science to ensure that UK farmers are world leaders?

George Eustice: Yes; my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We believe that there should be careful risk-based assessment when it comes to regulation. We also have a great opportunity to change the culture of regulation. The reality of the common agricultural policy, as it exists now, is that there are far too many complex rules against which farmers are judged. We have an opportunity to simplify that and have a much more effective system going forward.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The National Farmers Union says that the number of seasonal farm workers coming to the UK has dropped by 17%, and a report published this week states that

“the silence from Government on the labour question is astonishing.” Food production, processing and packaging rely heavily on migrant labour—the Office for National Statistics states that they make up 41% of the workforce. Why are the Government ignoring the industry’s warnings? Will they compensate for the loss of produce as a direct result of this complacency, and will they ensure that the food manufacturing industry continues to have access to the workforce it needs?

George Eustice: There is no silence from the Government on this issue—indeed, there was a debate in Westminster Hall just last week where we discussed this issue in detail. We have the seasonal agricultural workers scheme transition group, which monitors seasonal labour

requirements. It met in March, it had informal discussions last week, and it will meet again later this week. In addition, the Home Office intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to do a piece of work on the labour needs of this country after we leave the EU.

Sue Hayman: Well, that all sounds marvellous, doesn't it? So why does the report say we have a looming food crisis if everything is under control? It says we could actually run out of some foods after Brexit. One of the authors, Professor Tim Lang, accuses the Government of a

"serious policy failing on an unprecedented scale" for their handling of the food security situation. The Secretary of State is notoriously dismissive of expert advice, but does he accept the findings of this report, and will he meet me and industry representatives to urgently discuss the food crisis before us?

George Eustice: The issue with that report is that it has not looked at the issues as closely as we have in DEFRA. We have been studying all these issues at tremendous length. The truth about food security is that it depends on increasing food production globally at a sustainable level and on open markets around the world, and those are challenges whether we are in or out of the EU. There is nothing about leaving the EU that will affect our food security.

CAP Successor Scheme: Scotland

3. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on a successor scheme to the Common Agricultural Policy after the UK leaves the EU. [900588]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Since being appointed as the Secretary of State, I have met the Scottish Agriculture Minister and the Scottish Environment Minister at the royal highland show. I will continue to work with all of the devolved Administrations, and indeed to consult more widely, on the design of any new system of agricultural support.

Alan Brown: Those are nice, kind words from the Secretary of State about how he will work with the Scottish Government, but the blatant reality is that clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill is one of the most naked power grabs ever seen, because it allows the Westminster Government to impose decisions in devolved matters. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, despite his rhetoric, this means that Westminster can impose a successor CAP system on the Scottish Government?

Michael Gove: What I can confirm is that the conversation I had with the Scottish Agriculture Minister and the Scottish Environment Minister was cordial. We have committed to working constructively together, and each of the devolved Assemblies and devolved Administrations has a role to play in helping us to design the successor regime to the common agricultural policy.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The greatest agricultural event not just in Britain, but in Europe and indeed the world—the royal Welsh show—is taking place next week. Does my right hon. Friend

agree with me and with the 250,000 people who attend the event that, in a pre and a post-Brexit world, the best showcasing of agriculture is taking place in Builth Wells?

Michael Gove: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. I am looking forward to going to Builth Wells on Monday. It will be my second visit to Wales in a week; I was in Cardiff last week talking to NFU Cymru, the Farmers Union of Wales, and the Country Land and Business Association in Wales. As someone whose wife is Welsh, my affection for my hon. Friend's constituency—and, indeed, for the royal Welsh show and for Welsh agriculture—is second to none.

Mr Speaker: I hope the right hon. Gentleman's affection will be reciprocated. We very much hope so.

Michael Gove: It certainly is by Mrs Gove.

Mr Speaker: I am very glad to hear it. We are all interested to hear about the very healthy state of the Secretary of State's marriage, which was not in doubt.

Animal Welfare

5. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve animal welfare. [900590]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Well, I think we are all on the same page in the Conservative party and singing from the same hymn sheet.

We have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and I am continually building on this. We plan reforms to pet sales and licensing, to live exports, and to welfare at slaughter, and we are considering some other animal welfare measures as well.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the Minister for his answer. Like many colleagues in the House, I have received huge volumes of correspondence on this issue. Will he commit to consulting closely with environmental and animal welfare groups when establishing these new regulations?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. May I take this opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend not just on her election to this House but on her brilliant maiden speech yesterday? Consultation with environmental and animal welfare groups has been at the heart of the approach that DEFRA has taken, and it has also been central to developing the new policy agenda that I hope to take forward.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): I am very concerned about the potential impact on animal welfare in Dudley of illegally dumped waste at the Rowan Oak site in Shaw Road. Local businesses are furious about the amount of time it is taking the Environment Agency to deal with this. Will the Secretary of State look at this personally, talk to the Environment Agency, and help me to get this matter sorted out?

Michael Gove: I certainly will. Again—

Mr Speaker: I am a little uncertain as to how the animals were impacted on by this matter, but I do not think any further adumbration on the issue is required from the hon. Gentleman; the Secretary of State seems at home, so let us hear from the fella.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion for his constituents, never more so than in raising this case. I have already talked to the Environment Agency about the increase in the number of illegal waste sites and the damage that does to human and, indeed, animal health and welfare. We are reviewing how we investigate and prosecute the criminals behind this activity.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am sure that people will be greatly reassured by what the Secretary of State has said today about animal welfare. On the back of that, will the Government commit to increase the penalties for people convicted of animal cruelty?

Michael Gove: I am actively reviewing this matter. As my hon. Friend knows, I am not someone who will automatically reach for stronger criminal sanctions as the only route to dealing with a problem, but there are particular cases of animal cruelty where we may well need to revisit the existing criminal sanctions in order to ensure that the very worst behaviour is dealt with using the full force of the law.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Across the country, complaints are still frequently made to the police concerning the killing and chasing of foxes and hares by hounds as part of organised hunts. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure better enforcement of the Hunting Act 2004, which clearly represents the will of the British people?

Michael Gove: The law of the land must always be enforced without fear or favour.

Leaving the EU: Food Security

6. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What assessment his Department has made of the potential effect on food security of the UK leaving the EU. [900591]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Food security depends on global factors including increasing global production sustainably, reducing waste, and ensuring open markets to facilitate trade around the world. With regard to the EU, we are prioritising securing the freest trade possible, including an ambitious and comprehensive free trade agreement and a new customs agreement.

Tom Brake: Does the Minister accept the definition of “food security” provided by the former Government chief scientific adviser, Sir John Beddington—notably, that food security is characterised as requiring a food system that is sufficient, sustainable, safe and equitable? By reference to which indicators of food security will DEFRA be judging the food security consequences of the post-Brexit food and agricultural system?

George Eustice: The Foresight report to which the right hon. Gentleman refers set out that this country has a high level of food security. We have open markets, and a relatively high level of self-sufficiency as well, although that is not the key factor in food security. The report actually highlighted that there were no issues on food security. As I said earlier, we do not believe that leaving the EU has any impact on food security at all.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Food security can be enhanced by supporting the export of great British foods throughout the world. It is no surprise that I love British food and drink—particularly Lancashire cheese and British beer, both produced in my constituency. Will the Minister ensure that as we approach Brexit and these trade deals, we do a lot more to ensure that many more markets around the world can enjoy the food that I enjoy here in this country?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We made it clear in our manifesto that we want to open new markets and to produce more and export more great British food from this country. He cites some great examples from his own constituency. We continue to press hard to open new markets and create new opportunities.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said earlier that he was not in favour of mega-farms, yet there has been a 26% increase in the history of this Government. This has an effect not only on food security, animal welfare and food standards, but on the structure of our British farms, including the future of tenant farms. What will the Minister say to tenant farmers about their security after Brexit?

George Eustice: I had a meeting with the Tenancy Reform Industry Group just a couple of weeks ago, where we discussed in detail the issue of tenancy law, including whether we could review the workings of existing farm business tenancies and whether we could do more to encourage models such as contract farming, share farming and franchise farming to create new opportunities for new entrants.

Rural Economy

7. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the rural economy. [900592]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government are absolutely committed to supporting and strengthening the rural economy to allow good businesses to grow and thrive. We have invested nearly £2 billion of public funding in delivering superfast broadband. We have the universal service obligation, and we will be securing improvements to mobile connectivity in rural areas.

Sir Edward Leigh: The best way to help the rural economy is to keep farmers in business. Will my hon. Friend give me a modest little birthday present today, and undertake to be positive about reintroducing a deficiency payments scheme? That scheme was very popular with farmers before 1972, and the United States

introduced such a scheme after 2002 that was not contrary to World Trade Organisation rules. The scheme would actually help the rural economy greatly.

Dr Coffey: We will study my hon. Friend's comments carefully. I must admit that I was born in 1971, so I do not have any direct knowledge, but he will know of the ongoing support that the Conservative Government will continue to give farmers, and we have made a commitment to continue that stable support as we transition out of the EU.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): One of the best things the Government could do to support farmers in my constituency, particularly sheep farmers, is just give them simple clarity about whether they will be paying tariffs on their exports to Europe of sheep products. That will be key to their ability to plan their investment with certainty during the next 18 months.

Dr Coffey: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have set out the approach we intend to seek for a comprehensive free trade agreement with the European Union once we depart from it. We want to provide such clarity as soon as possible, and he will be aware that the negotiations are ongoing.

17. [900602] **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): I note that the Minister is aware that the cost of the bureaucracy related to applying for common agricultural policy subsidies has been considerable for farmers over recent years. Will she reassure me that this cost under the new British agricultural policy, or whatever it ends up being called, will be considerably lower and that it will be easier to apply for?

Dr Coffey: I am very happy to assure my hon. Friend that our future agricultural policy will be designed in a way that reduces needless and energy-sapping bureaucracy. We expect it to be simpler than the CAP, but she will recognise that we have a duty to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent carefully and transparently. We will continue to reward farmers and landowners, who manage our precious countryside, in a way that supports the best environmental outcomes.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the Minister's answer to the original question, she mentioned the roll-out of rural broadband. May I appeal to the Minister by saying that the roll-out is taking far too long in many communities, including my own constituency? What more will she do to speed up the installation of superfast broadband in rural areas?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Welsh Assembly Government are working closely with local communities and BT Openreach to reach such places. I am sure he will be able to follow up on that directly, but I will pass on his concerns to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital.

EU Markets (West Country Food Exporters)

8. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with food exporters in the west country on safeguarding tariff-free access to EU markets.

[900593]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I have a number of leading west country food manufacturers in my constituency, including Falfish and Rodda's cream, both of which are successful exporters. In addition, we are working closely with trade organisations, such as the Food and Drink Federation, to understand the needs of the industry. We have been clear that we intend to put in place a new partnership with the EU, which will include a comprehensive free trade agreement.

Mr Bradshaw: The Minister will know that 80% of west country fish and 30% of our lamb is exported straight to EU markets, free—currently—of tariffs and other barriers. Those food producers will be extremely concerned by the comments today of the International Trade Secretary, who appears completely relaxed about the prospect of leaving the EU with no deal. Does the Minister agree with him, or with the Chancellor, who said that this would be a very, very bad thing?

George Eustice: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the UK has a significant trade deficit in food and drink products with the EU, so the EU needs access to our market as well. We have a significant deficit of around £18 billion a year, and I believe it is in the EU's interests, therefore, to secure a free trade agreement too.

Mr Speaker: Ah, how very apposite; the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) was banging on about fish. I call Mr Marcus Fysh.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I am afraid I am not going to speak about fish today, Mr Speaker, but another time I will be happy to do so.

Farmers in Somerset expect their Government to negotiate continued tariff-free cross-channel trade, and hundreds of thousands of farmers across the EU expect the same of theirs. What are Ministers doing to secure engagement now between Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Europe's national customs agencies to ensure that timely and appropriate data exchange keeps agricultural trade smooth after we leave the EU?

George Eustice: We have set out plans in this Session for Bills dealing with trade and customs, and those Bills will address the issues that my hon. Friend has raised. I know that colleagues right across Government are working in a great deal of detail on customs issues to secure an agreement.

Farm Subsidies

9. **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What his Department's policy is on farm subsidies after 2020; and if he will make a statement. [900594]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government have committed to providing the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of the Parliament. We have also announced our intention to introduce an agriculture Bill in this Session to provide stability for farmers as we leave the European Union, and of course we will continue to protect and enhance our natural environment.

Tim Farron: The average hill farm has an annual income before CAP payments of minus £10,000, and therefore hill farming as a sector is under enormous pressure, despite the fact that it is utterly fundamental to food security, to the protection of our environment and, indeed, to the maintenance of the landscape that has just won the Lake District world heritage site status. Will the Secretary of State reflect on the fact that successive Governments have used the common agricultural policy as an excuse for not providing direct, tailored support for hill farmers? Will he use this opportunity to promise me, the House and hill farmers across the country that he will introduce a hill farm allowance to protect our uplands and the hill farming industry?

Michael Gove: A very well-crafted question, and may I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his re-election in Westmorland and Lonsdale and take the opportunity to pay tribute to the dignified and principled way in which he has led his party? He is absolutely right that hill farming and upland farming matter. The proposition he puts forward is not the only way of ensuring that we can maintain the environmental and broader cultural benefits that hill farming brings, but I shall do everything possible to ensure that as we replace the common agricultural policy, the needs of hill and upland farmers are met more effectively than ever before.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank Members very much for supporting me in becoming the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. As we reform our support systems for agriculture, and our environmental schemes in particular, we can make them less complicated—we will not have to count trees, work out whether a tree is a sapling and so on—and ensure that we can retain water and do everything that we want to do with the environment, as well as producing food. We have an ideal opportunity to do that as we bring the new British farming policy together.

Michael Gove: I add my voice to those of everyone in the House in congratulating my hon. Friend on securing re-election as Chairman of the Select Committee. Once again, he absolutely hits the nail on the head. As we move outside the European Union, our system of agricultural support must protect farmers through the vicissitudes they face; and, critically, the environmental benefits that farmers secure for us every day must be at the heart of any new system of support.

Topical Questions

T1. [900604] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): May I wish every Member of the House an enjoyable recess and hope that they will take the opportunity to sample some of the range of great British food and drink that is available, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) pointed out, as they holiday in these islands? Over the next few days I will be visiting Northern Ireland and Wales, and I very much enjoyed my earlier visits to Scotland. Agriculture and fisheries are stronger as part of our United Kingdom, whichever part of it we are privileged to represent.

Mr Carmichael: Of course, the finest food to be found anywhere includes Shetland lamb and Orkney beef, which are always best eaten in the community of their production. Anybody who wishes to join me over the summer recess in Orkney or Shetland will be very welcome. Those fine products get a lot of protection from the protected geographical status and protected designation of origin schemes, which we currently enjoy as part of the European Union. What is DEFRA doing to ensure that our food producers have protection that is at least as good after we leave?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. As someone who recently had the opportunity to sample Orkney's fine smoked cheese at the royal highland show, may I add my praise for the produce of the beautiful islands he represents? Geographical indicators are of course a very useful tool. We want to ensure that, outside the European Union, British food, from whichever part of these islands it originates, can have its status and provenance protected at the heart of effective marketing.

T4. [900607] **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Considering that my right hon. Friend has managed to complete 99.2% of the common agricultural policy payments in England, what assistance and co-operation can he offer the devolved Administration in Edinburgh, who have managed only to reach 90.4%?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It did not surprise me, though it may have surprised others, that we increased the representation of Scottish Conservatives in this House by 1,200% at the general election, not least in the north-east and Ochil and South Perthshire, where farmers are suffering as a result of the maladministration of the Scottish Government. Many of them are asking why the Scottish Government cannot learn from the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs and, instead of prating on about independence and constitutional uncertainty, learn from their partners in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks a great deal about gaining control of our waters after Brexit, but, as usual with this Government, so much of the detail is sadly lacking. Since 2013, three British-based vessels of the Royal Navy fishery protection squadron have not been exclusively used for fisheries enforcement. The Government's own figures show that the number of boats boarded by the fishery protection vessels has plummeted from 1,400 to just 278 over the past six years. Will the Minister explain what, "Take back control of our waters," actually means and why fishing enforcement has dwindled so dramatically under this Government? Will he agree to conduct an urgent review to assist the level of fisheries enforcement required now and after Brexit?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I can tell the hon. Lady exactly what taking back control means. When we leave the EU we automatically, under international law, become an independent coastal state. That means that we will have responsibility for managing our exclusive economic zone, which is 200 nautical miles or the median line. We already enforce those waters. The hon. Lady raises concerns about the number of vessels, but most of the

work these days is digital. We have a control room in Newcastle that monitors the movement of every single fishing vessel in the country.

T5. [900608] **Ms Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): Although the Government provide support for cattle farmers affected by TB, can the Secretary of State reassure me that goat and sheep farmers in Cheshire will get comparable compensation?

George Eustice: My right hon. Friend is right. There is a particular problem in Cheshire, which is why two years ago we introduced six-monthly surveillance testing. We held a consultation in December on changing the way in which we calculate compensation rates on other species, including sheep and goats. The pig industry has some concerns and we are reviewing and addressing them. It is important to recognise that we already pay compensation to people with sheep and goat farms affected by TB.

T2. [900605] **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): Is “thick as mince, lazy as a toad and vain as Narcissus” an appropriate description to use for a fellow Cabinet member? If hard Brexiteers in our Government are falling out in that way, how on earth can the Secretary of State expect our European Union partners to take our negotiations seriously?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman, I am sure, is aware that we are working well together in government—*[Laughter]*—and I do not recognise the description he just gave as fitting any Member of this House.

T6. [900609] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Farmers in west Oxfordshire welcome the Government’s assurance that CAP funding will be guaranteed until 2020 and for structural schemes for the lifetime of the scheme. Could the Government give further assurance as to what assistance will be given to farmers who plan on a five-year cycle?

George Eustice: I have been very clear to farmers that, in moving to a new system, we recognise the importance of a gradual transition. We have been very clear that we will work with farmers and industry over the next year or so as we work out our plans. We will then put in place a gradual transition from the old system to the new.

T3. [900606] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Blaydon have suffered badly from landfill sites on their doorstep. What plans does the Secretary of State have, first to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill, and secondly to ensure that environmental protections are not only preserved but strengthened in the Brexit process?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I welcome the hon. Lady to the House. I am sure that she will be a worthy successor to David Anderson, the gentleman with whom I worked previously. I assure her that we are working with councils to identify the barriers to increasing recycling in their areas. One London borough recycles less than 15% of its waste whereas other areas

recycle more than 60%. There are lessons that we can share, and I am actively engaged in that, including in working with the Environment Agency on the proper regulation of landfill sites.

T7. [900611] **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) has drawn the House’s attention to the fantastic show in his constituency. I wish to draw hon. Members’ attention to the most spectacular summer’s day out in Worcestershire, the Hanbury show, which is held in my constituency. However, the farming communities in Inkberrow, Hanbury and the Lench, who take part in the show with their fantastic produce, are concerned that, post-Brexit, there will be standards that affect the import and export of their products and have a negative impact on their trade. Will the Minister give us specific reassurances on that?

George Eustice: The Hanbury show is indeed a famous and strong agricultural show. The Secretary of State addressed the point earlier. We are clear that we prize our high standards of animal welfare and food and that they will not be compromised in any future trade agreement.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In Blaenau Gwent, we are proud of our Tudor Brewery. However, although beers can trade on their Britishness, there is no guarantee that they are produced on these shores. With calls to buy British ever louder, what are the Government doing to ensure that customers know that British brands are made in Britain?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes a good case and I look forward to enjoying a pint of Blaenau Gwent-brewed beer before too long. Outside the EU, we will have the capacity, should we choose to exercise it, more effectively to brand British food as British. As I said earlier, Members of all parties recognise that provenance matters for food and drink, and British is always best.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Last summer, I was pleased to meet key representatives from the charity Surfers Against Sewage. I congratulate them on their battle against plastics in our seas and marine environment, including the Solent and the River Itchen in my constituency. The summer holidays are due to begin. Will Ministers outline the work that we are doing around our coastlines, particularly the Solent and the Itchen, to ensure that they are safe for water sports and our local wildlife?

Dr Coffey: I, too, congratulate Surfers Against Sewage on not only its direct activity, but its ongoing campaigns. I was therefore pleased to meet Hugo Tagholm in the past year. Our beaches are of better quality than at any time since the industrial revolution. Last year, we introduced tougher bathing water standards, and even under those tough standards, 93.2% of England’s beaches were rated excellent or good. I visited the Itchen last month. I am aware of some of the challenges, including the pressures of abstraction, but we will do what we can to improve the ecological as well as the leisure quality of rivers and beaches.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), will the Secretary of State say exactly how he will ensure that products such as traditional

Grimsby smoked fish, produced by the excellent Alfred Enderby's traditional smokehouse in my constituency, retain their protected geographical indications?

Michael Gove: As someone who grew up with the scent of smoked fish in their nostrils, because that is what my father produced, I am committed to making sure that we have the best protection. Only last week, I visited H. Foreman & Son, who now enjoy a designation as providers and producers of London cure smoked salmon. As we have just discussed, we will have the opportunity outside the EU to ensure that British food can be more effectively branded as British and best.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the thought that must sit in his head as he plans a new management system for our fisheries is that it has to be on an ecosystems basis? That will allow him to ignore the simple blandishments of so many people who claim that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to fisheries management, which was the big failing of the common fisheries policy.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is right. He was a brilliant fisheries Minister, who was responsible within the EU for ensuring that the common fisheries policy, imperfect as it is in so many ways, was reformed to deal with discards and to develop our fish stocks on a more sustainable basis. Outside the EU, as an independent coastal state, we can do even more, but he is right that conservation must be at the heart of our policy.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I return to the issue of animal welfare? The Secretary of State will recognise that the use of antibiotics in farming is part of an animal welfare regime. However, there is massive concern that overuse of antibiotics is destroying their effectiveness, both for animals and humans. What can be done to reverse this trend?

George Eustice: The Veterinary Medicines Directorate and our chief vet have been working very closely with the Department of Health on plans to reduce the use of antibiotics. Great success has been achieved in sectors such as poultry, where there has been a substantial reduction of some 40% to 50% in antibiotics use. Often it is about adopting different approaches to husbandry to reduce reliance on antibiotics, but although a lot of progress has been made, there is more to do.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

EU Referendum Campaign

1. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the commission on allegations of illegal funding during the EU referendum campaign.

[900612]

BrIDGET Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South): The commission has published two reports that include its assessment of the rules on campaign funding for the

EU referendum. The commission has also completed investigations of issues with a small number of campaigner spending returns, none of which related to impermissible donations. It is continuing to consider issues with some campaigners' spending returns, in line with its published enforcement policy. The commission publishes the outcome of all investigations on its website once investigations have been completed.

Mr Bradshaw: Can my hon. Friend confirm—or, if not, ask the Electoral Commission—whether it has received allegations of illegal financial funding from Russia to elements of the leave campaign?

BrIDGET Phillipson: The commission is aware of media reports that allege that there could have been Russian involvement in the EU referendum. These cover a wide range of alleged activities that are beyond the commission's remit. Any allegation with evidence that a registered campaigner accepted impermissible donations from Russia would be investigated in line with the commission's enforcement policy, but I am sure that officials from the commission would be more than happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend—and she is a friend—agree that not only is illegal funding wrong, but so is electoral fraud? May I invite her to ask the commission to conduct a proper inquiry into having a national voter register, to ensure that people do not double and triple vote in general elections and other elections?

BrIDGET Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He will know that the 381 electoral registers are maintained by different electoral registration offices across the country, and it is not currently possible to interrogate them collectively in order to identify duplicate entries or voting in more than one area. The commission will be happy to work with the Government to consider potential solutions to reduce this risk.

Election Expenses and Political Donations

2. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment the commission has made of the effectiveness of the regulation of (a) election expenses and (b) donations to political parties.

[900613]

BrIDGET Phillipson: The Electoral Commission continues to regulate the rules on UK political finance in a way that is fair and proportionate, focusing on helping parties to comply with the law. Since 2013 the commission has been calling for changes to improve enforcement and sanctioning of the political finance rules. It has recommended increasing the maximum penalty it can impose and extending its enforcement responsibilities to some candidate spending rules. The commission will publish a report in the autumn on the regulation of election expenses and donations to political parties in the 2017 general election.

Martyn Day: There has been significant media coverage of the 2015 general election expenses issue, with the Tories being fined the maximum £70,000, and with an hon. Member reportedly having been charged. In March, the Electoral Commission chair, Sir John Holmes, said:

"There is a risk that some political parties might come to view the payment of these fines as a cost of doing business".

Might it be worth making fine limits proportionate to the number of candidates standing for a party at an election?

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: The hon. Gentleman is right to make it clear that the Electoral Commission is of the view that the maximum fine of £20,000 could well be seen as the cost of doing business. The commission has called for an increase in the maximum penalty it can impose on political parties and other campaigners. It is of the view that the penalties should be more proportionate to the income and expenditure of larger and well-funded campaigners.

Emergency Proxy Voting

3. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What assessment the commission has made of the suitability of the rules on emergency proxy vote applications for people who have suffered a family bereavement. [900614]

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: The commission has recommended changes to the qualifying circumstances for appointing an emergency proxy since 2011. It recommends extending the qualifying circumstances to include those who have unforeseen caring responsibilities or who have experienced the death of a close relative. In its September 2016 response to the commission's statutory report on the 2015 general election, the UK Government confirmed that they had no plans to extend the qualifying circumstances for appointing an emergency proxy.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Lady for her answer. My constituent Ruth Jones was unable to vote at the recent election following a family bereavement. She was attending her grandmother's funeral at the time. However, had she been called away for a work emergency, she could have qualified for an emergency proxy vote. Can the hon. Lady reassure me that the Electoral Commission will continue to push for changes to enable a family bereavement to be seen as having the same impact on a voter as a work emergency?

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: I am sorry to hear about the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman described, and the way in which they affected his constituent. I can assure him that the Electoral Commission is still of the view that there is a gap in the emergency proxy provision, and remains concerned about the need to enhance the accessibility of the process by extending the qualifying circumstances. I am sure that the commission would welcome any support that he could offer in that regard.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Rules and procedures on proxies, emergency proxies and postal votes are good only if they are followed. What action is the Electoral Commission taking to address the shambolic handling of the general election in Plymouth, which resulted in 1,500 postal votes not being sent out, and 6,500 votes not being included in the declaration on the evening of the count?

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: The commission is collecting information from returning officers about their experience of the 8 June general election. I am sure that it would

also welcome the views of my hon. Friend, should he wish to share them with representatives of the commission, either in writing or through a meeting, which I am sure they would be happy to attend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind the questionably massive amount of proxy votes used in some constituencies in Northern Ireland, including Foyle, will the hon. Lady outline the steps being taken to stop the alleged abuse by some parties of this vital voting mechanism, which I, too, believe could be compassionately extended to grieving families?

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that different arrangements relating to identity are in place in Northern Ireland. However, any concerns about possible criminal activity would be a matter for the police force, and I suggest that he encourages anyone with evidence of criminal activity to report it to the police.

Voter Registration and Boundary Commission Review

4. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What discussions the Committee has had with the commission on the effect of (a) recent rises in voter registration and (b) the 2017 general election on the conclusions of the most recent Boundary Commission review. [900616]

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: The Electoral Commission this week published a report on electoral registration at the June 2017 UK general election. It highlights that online electoral registration resulted in a record electorate of an estimated 46.8 million people. The commission's report argues that further modernisation is required to reduce the impact of large numbers of duplicate registration applications, and to ensure that the registration process is more joined up with other public services. The commission does not have any responsibilities in relation to the review of parliamentary constituency boundaries, which are a matter for the UK's boundary commissions.

Dr Huq: As my hon. Friend points out, 2.9 million new people registered to vote and became part of a record electorate in the recent general election. There was a similar spike before last year's referendum. Surely we should now heed the Electoral Commission's recommendation that boundary reviews take place after a major electoral event, to take those new people into account and to ensure that the 2022 election does not hark back to the outmoded situation of 2015.

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: The current review of parliamentary constituencies is a matter for the boundary commissions, but the Electoral Commission has previously recommended that Parliament and the Boundary Commission consider whether it would be more appropriate to base reviews on electoral data taken from the registers used for elections, rather than from the register published on 1 December.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is perfectly reasonable for students and others to be registered in two places if they are normally resident in both. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be sensible to check one in 100 late registrations to see whether they are

double-registered and whether double voting has taken place? That would give us more scope to determine whether and how much fraud took place at the last election.

Bridget Phillipson: I am sure that the Electoral Commission will take heed of the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. It takes seriously any suggestion that an individual might have voted twice, but so far there is little evidence of widespread abuse in the recent general election. As he says, it is possible in certain circumstances for people—including students and MPs—to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place. However, it is a criminal offence to cast more than one vote on their behalf in a UK parliamentary general election.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): One of the most efficient organisations in recruiting young people to the electoral register is Bite the Ballot. It can register 16 to 18-year-olds for as little as 25p per elector; by comparison, the Electoral Commission's advertising campaigns cost £80 to £90 per download. Will my hon. Friend liaise with the Electoral Commission and ask whether it will develop service level agreements with this excellent organisation?

Bridget Phillipson: I am more than happy to take up my hon. Friend's suggestion. He is a doughty campaigner on this issue, and I am sure that he will continue that work now that he is back with us in this place.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): The commission is correct to highlight the discrepancy between the 1 December assessment of our electorate, and the electorate in our most recent election. In my constituency, the difference between the 2015 and 2017 elections was 8,000, which is over 10%. Would the hon. Lady welcome an investigation by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee into how we deal with such discrepancies?

Bridget Phillipson: It will be for the Committee and its new members, when it is constituted, to consider the best way of examining the issues. We all want to ensure that registers are as complete as possible, that people are not missed out and that there is no reduction in the number of people registered to vote, so that the boundary commissions can consider parliamentary constituency boundaries based on the best available registers.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Fuel Poverty

5. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to tackle food poverty. [900618]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): First of all, may I congratulate the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) on her appointment to her role representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission? I thought she did a very good job of answering the questions.

Seventy-five per cent. of churches collect food, 38% provide volunteers, 29% help to manage a food bank, and 21% distribute food vouchers. Churches also

work in partnership with organisations such as Citizens Advice and Christians Against Poverty to tackle the underlying causes of food poverty.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the right hon. Lady for that response. As she will know, the Archbishop of Canterbury is the president of Feeding Britain, and I was pleased to be able to launch its latest pilot in Bristol on Friday. I appreciate the work that churches are doing in providing food banks, and the other work that she outlined. What more can they do to lobby the Government on the underlying causes of food poverty that cause people to resort to such measures?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Christians Against Poverty is proactive in trying to tackle the underlying causes by offering free debt advice and financial education programmes, for example. The charity has just appointed Dickens Heath church in my constituency to provide those courses over a wide region, so I suggest that the hon. Lady may like to approach it about doing the same in Bristol.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating June Osborne, the Bishop of Llandaff, who was consecrated in Brecon cathedral on Saturday, becoming the second female bishop in the Church in Wales?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am quite sure that the Bishop of Llandaff will focus on the needs of people who may suffer from food poverty in her diocese, but I of course congratulate her on her appointment.

Mr Speaker: Very deft.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that food banks in Stroud are run largely through the churches, but they are under huge pressure due to the number of volunteers they need and the amount of food that they have to collect. Will she have a word with the Government about the sanctions regime, which is one of the major causes of the increase in food bank usage?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As Members of Parliament, it is important that we address the underlying causes. I had a letter from the Trussell Trust just last month, which said that people

“may be reassured to hear that, on average people are only referred to Trussell Trust foodbanks two times in a 12-month period”,

and that the model is

“designed to help people in a crisis”.

As Members, we need to address the nature of the crises that make it necessary for people to get help.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Electoral Regulations (Compliance)

6. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Whether the Commission is undertaking a review of political parties' compliance with electoral regulations during the 2017 general election. [900619]

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON (Houghton and Sunderland South): Prior to the general election, the commission produced detailed guidance for political parties to help them comply with their statutory reporting requirements. The commission also engaged with a number of parties to discuss our arrangements for compliance. Its advice service for parties was available and well used throughout the campaign. The commission will publish parties' spending returns for the general election as soon as is practicably possible once the deadlines for submitting the returns has passed.

Wayne David: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. She should be aware that serious allegations have been made about the use of a call centre in Neath by the Conservative party during the general election campaign. I want to tell the House that I have heard from the Electoral Commission, which has stated in writing that South Wales police are formally considering the allegations.

BrIDGET PHILLIPSON: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. He will know that political parties that spend over £250,000 at the general election have six months to send audited spending returns to the commission, and they will need to include details of all party spending on campaigning at the election.

It is a potential offence under the Representation of the People Acts for there to be paid canvassing on behalf of the candidate, and any allegations would be a matter for the relevant police force to consider.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Rural Parish Growth

7. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What funds the Church of England makes available for rural parish growth. [900622]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): Rural parish funding is primarily the responsibility of the individual diocese, but the Church Commissioners have made available national support under the strategic development fund. To date, the fund has provided £34.6 million for 32 projects in 25 dioceses.

Victoria Prentis: As you know, Mr Speaker, I talk a lot about my worries regarding the recruitment of obstetricians in Banbury, but I am equally concerned about recruitment to the rural Church. Can my right hon. Friend help me by explaining what more the Church can do to encourage the right sort of ordinands to apply, and what sort of training can we give them when they apply?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church is committed to doubling the number of people entering training by 2020, and it has made very good progress with the push on training ordinands. Since 2014, we have seen an increase of 14% in the numbers training for priesthood, and my hon. Friend may be interested to hear that there has been an above-average number of women—14%—and that 25% of that cohort is under the age of 32.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But would not growth in the Church of England be easier if it moved on from its cruel and outdated approach to both clergy and laity who are in same-sex relationships? Will the right hon. Lady tell the bishops that simply kicking this issue into the long grass for another three years, as the General Synod agreed last week, is just not acceptable?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It is important to see in balance the progress that has been made by the Church. At the Synod, important decisions were made, including on tackling homophobic bullying in Church of England schools—the Church is the largest provider of education in this country—and on taking steps to ban trans and conversion therapies; that was voted on in the Synod. The fact that the Church is making progress in this area is hopefully an indication of more to follow.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Rural parish growth is being handicapped by the fact that the clergy are responsible for six, eight or even more parishes. What efforts are being made to ensure that more people are recruited to the clergy, and that they are directed towards rural parishes?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I said, the Church has set itself a target—that is the important thing—of doubling the number of people entering training by 2020, and it is making progress by increasing the numbers coming into training.

It is perhaps worth noting that the Church has changed the ways in which people can train for the priesthood. They can train by residential course, as is traditional, but they can also train on the job and through peripatetic learning, which makes it generally easier for a much wider range of people to train for the priesthood, if they feel called to do so.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well.

Michael Fabricant: On the subject of training, does my right hon. Friend not also think that training in human resources and personnel is important? She will know that the Dean of Peterborough, Charles Taylor, was sacked from that cathedral and given only 24 hours' notice to leave the deanery. Does she think that that was not only unprofessional on the part of the chapter, but very unchristian?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Obviously, I have sympathy with anyone who loses their job, but with the greatest respect, those facts are not quite correct. On 2 October 2016, the dean announced his retirement, and he did not leave the deanery, and was not asked to leave it, until the following February, giving him six months' residence—

Michael Fabricant: No, he was not. That is wrong.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Those are the facts I have been given.

I think we should try to leave this term on a happier note, so I conclude by wishing all colleagues a very welcome recess.

Mr Speaker: I join the right hon. Lady in that. She was typically gracious in her comments about the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), whom I warmly welcome to her new responsibilities, which, as has been said, have been very effectively discharged today. I also thank the right hon.

Lady, who is always courteous, fair and comprehensive in responding to inquiries. I hope that both Members can take a rest from their onerous duties—both their constituency duties, and their duties in respect of the matters about which we have heard this morning.

Contaminated Blood

10.35 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the responsibility for establishing an inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): I begin by adding my personal apology to those who have previously spoken in this House about the tragedy of contaminated blood, and by reiterating that the Government recognise the terrible impact contaminated blood has had on many thousands of lives.

The Government recognise that previous inquiries into the events that led to thousands of people being infected with HIV and/or hepatitis C through NHS-supplied blood or blood products did not go far enough. That is why, on Tuesday 11 July 2017, the Prime Minister committed to establishing a further inquiry so that the causes of this tragedy can be fully understood.

Once established, we want the inquiry to be fully independent. Before it is established, however, there is a need to define its scope and format so that terms of reference may be set by the relevant Secretary of State. Given the tragedy's impact on so many lives, it is vital that we get this right and that we get it right from the start. I am aware of the concerns that have been raised this week by those affected, by campaign groups and by Members of this House. Indeed, I spoke to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on Tuesday about this very issue.

I reassure the House that the Government have as yet made no final decisions on the scope and format of an inquiry, or on its leadership. I have newly taken on this policy area, and I am keen to make sure that all those affected are given an opportunity to give us their thoughts and opinions. I understand it is normal practice for public inquiries to be sponsored by the relevant Department. However, we are keen to listen to the concerns that have been raised and ensure that they are addressed, which is why we are in discussions with the Cabinet Office and colleagues across Government to ensure that this inquiry does its job, and does it well, under appropriate leadership.

That is why an early consultative meeting was scheduled for today, hosted at the Cabinet Office, and the Secretary of State and Ministers hope to understand further the important views of those affected on the shape and establishment of an inquiry. This is the first of several meetings that the Government would like to offer over the coming weeks. I strongly encourage anyone affected to give us their views. Our door is open to anyone who wants to discuss the inquiry or raise any concerns they may have.

It is important to note that, whatever arrangements are agreed for this independent inquiry, safeguards will be put in place to ensure independence—for instance, by ensuring that the secretary to the inquiry has never worked at the Department of Health or any of its agencies. I reiterate that we are absolutely committed to a thorough and transparent inquiry, and we want to establish the best format and remit. That is why we want

to hear as many opinions as possible, and we will work with those affected and Members of this House to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the Minister for the clarity of what she has just said. I should emphasise that this is not an occasion for a general debate on the contaminated blood scandal. We have had that on many occasions, and I have also granted urgent questions previously to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) on this matter. The issue is very specifically the locus, the responsibility and possibly, at a stretch, the scope. If Members can tailor their questions accordingly, it would be greatly appreciated.

Diana Johnson: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Although I welcome last week's announcement of an inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, the vast majority of people affected by this scandal, their families, campaign groups and legal representatives, plus many cross-party parliamentarians, are, like me, dismayed to see the Department of Health leading on the establishment of this inquiry. The Department of Health, an implicated party at the heart of so much that has gone wrong over the past 45 years, must have no role in how this inquiry is established—in my view, it is akin to asking South Yorkshire police to lead an inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster. I regret that the Government have not been able to understand that putting the Department of Health in charge at this time immediately undermines their excellent decision to call a public inquiry last week. In consequence, contaminated blood campaigners boycotted a meeting organised by the Department of Health at 10 am today in protest. Another Department must surely now take over the responsibility for consulting on the remit of this inquiry.

I am pleased that the Government acknowledge the overwhelming and unanimous opposition to the Department of Health consulting on the inquiry, including from more than 250 campaigners and 10 campaign groups, the Haemophilia Society, and the law firms Collins Law and Leigh Day, which together represent 716 claimants. Nevertheless, the Minister needs to address two questions urgently. Why, on Tuesday 18 July, did the Department of Health call a meeting for 10 am today, with just two days' notice, in central London, and at a time that is most difficult, inconvenient and expensive for people affected to attend? When I spoke to the Minister, she told me that the Government plan to update the House by September and get the inquiry up and running as soon as possible. That had not been made clear to campaigners or MPs, and I wondered why.

I still believe that the case is even more pressing for another Department to take over the work of establishing this inquiry now. That Department must then have a true and meaningful consultation with everyone affected, so that they can be fully involved and have confidence in this public inquiry.

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I mentioned, no firm view has been taken as to which Department will run the inquiry, but as the Minister with responsibility for this area the

[*Jackie Doyle-Price*]

House would consider it amiss if I were not having meetings and discussions with those affected about the inquiry's remit. When the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), made the statement to the House about the inquiry, we made it clear that we wanted to progress as soon as possible. The Secretary of State called this meeting because we want to hear directly from the victims about what they want from the inquiry. We are very much in listening mode. A decision has not yet been taken as to which Department will run the inquiry but ultimately, as a Minister, I am accountable to Parliament for what happens in the Department of Health in those areas for which I have responsibility, and I want to be leading from the front, having those discussions.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I thank the Minister for saying that no decision has yet been taken about which Department will run the inquiry. Does she agree that perception is as important as reality in this matter, and therefore will she gain from this occasion a mindfulness of the weight placed by hon. Members, on both sides of the House, on the idea that the inquiry perhaps would be perceived to be more objective if some other Department took the lead?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I say to my right hon. Friend, and I have repeated this in other discussions as well, that the Cabinet Office is very closely involved in this, and this opportunity has given me the time to make that clear to the House. The Government are listening; we want to consult as widely as possible. No decision has yet been taken, but the Cabinet Office is closely involved in all the consultation we are currently having.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is disappointing that we are here again today, so soon after last week's announcement. A week ago, this House united in agreement to finally facilitate justice for those tragically affected by this scandal. Yet, as we have heard, in recent days Ministers have reneged on last week's promises and run roughshod over the affected community.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne) indicated dissent.

Mrs Hodgson: The Minister of State may shake his head, but that is how the community feel; we have spoken to them. There are three key questions that the Under-Secretary before us this morning must answer, and I hope she will be more forthcoming with much-needed answers than she was to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

Understandably, the community have deeply held suspicions when it comes to the Department of Health, so why are Ministers ignoring these concerns and the demands to facilitate an inquiry through another Department, such as the Ministry of Justice? This concern has been well documented in the letter to the Prime Minister by my hon. Friend, the Haemophilia Society, the 10 campaign groups and the law firms Collins Law and Leigh Day. Why does the Minister think the Government can so easily disregard all these people?

Events over the past few days have shown that last week's promise to consult, engage and listen to the community was simply warm words. The audacious move to hold a roundtable meeting this morning with so little notice to potential attendees from throughout the UK has hindered many from being involved in the process of setting up the inquiry. Will Ministers explain why the meeting was held at such short notice? Who did they plan to invite so that the meeting was properly consultative? In the end, who was scheduled to attend following the mass boycott by many of those invited, who felt that the offer of a meeting was a slap in the face?

It is important that the inquiry is held sooner rather than later, but not at the risk of jeopardising justice. Will the Minister publicly outline, now, the timetable for the inquiry? Do the Government intend to initiate the inquiry in September? If so, why has that not been made public? Why is it that we must bring Ministers to the House again to make this clear? Does that not go against everything we were promised last week? The Minister must remember the promises made just last week and ensure that consultation is central to the whole process; otherwise, the Government will fail this community, who must have the justice they so rightly deserve.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is in taking forward the consultation that we are delivering on the commitments made last week. We made it clear then that we wanted to get the inquiry going as soon as possible because, frankly, these people have waited long enough for answers. We have not ignored the concerns expressed by many about the role of the Department of Health in the inquiry. I repeat: no decision has yet been made and the Cabinet Office is closely involved in taking the matter forward.

As for the complaints about the short notice of the meeting organised by the Secretary of State this week, it is because we want to hear directly from the people affected as soon as possible that such a meeting was arranged before the House rises for recess. This is just the start. We want there to be good, effective dialogue because, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the rest of the House will appreciate, it is important that we all inspire confidence in this process. Given the cross-party support we had when the inquiry was announced, it is disappointing that we are now getting bogged down in the process.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Like others in the Chamber, I welcomed the Prime Minister's announcement last week of a public inquiry. I am encouraged by what the Minister is telling us this morning. One of my constituents who was affected has raised the issue of which Department should take the lead in the inquiry. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm what role victims, families and campaigners will play? How can they best engage with her and the Department at this stage?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We obviously want to hear from as many of the affected people as possible, and we will reflect on their representations. If they want to be very clear and blunt about the role of the Department of

Health, we need to hear those representations so that we can make the best decision about who takes forward the inquiry.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for asking this urgent question and pay tribute to her for continuously pushing on this important subject to ensure that we get justice for those so tragically affected. The inquiry must get the right answers, and it must command the confidence of those affected. Will the Minister confirm when a decision will be made as to which Department will lead on the establishment of the inquiry? Does she think it is right for the Department of Health to lead it? Will she confirm that the inquiry will include the families and victims, so that it is sensitive to what they want to know? Will the Government ensure that the inquiry will have to look at all matters, including documents, patient records and things that were altered and hidden, and that the things hidden behind public interest barriers will be opened up, so that light can be shed on this matter, as was the case with Hillsborough?

Jackie Doyle-Price: To be clear, the Department of Health is the sponsoring Department for the inquiry, which will be entirely independent. It is yet to be determined who will oversee it. Clearly, having made the statement and expressed our intention to hold an inquiry, we need to consult to make sure that that inquiry reflects on and answers the hon. Gentleman's questions. Central to that will be the need for it to be seen to be transparent, open and fully independent. Once it is established, the inquiry will be entirely removed from the Department of Health. That should be enough to inspire confidence, provided we get the consultation right so that we get the remit right.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Two of my constituents who were affected by this terrible tragedy have already contacted me with concerns about the Department of Health's involvement in the inquiry. This is a unique situation, especially with respect to the time it has taken to bring forward the inquiry, and credit should go to the Government for announcing it. Nevertheless, it is incredibly important that justice is seen to be done, so will the Minister consult members of the all-party group on haemophilia and contaminated blood with regard to who she determines are the right people to oversee the scope of the inquiry?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am keen to hear from all Members of the House and members of the public on how they feel the inquiry should be taken forward. That is the spirit in which we are embarking on this consultation.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the Government's decision to hold this inquiry in response to the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). I know that the Health Minister is acting in good faith, but over many years Department of Health officials have advised there is no need for the inquiry and no problem at the heart of the issue. Will she recognise that because of that it would have much greater credibility for many of those who have campaigned on this issue if the sponsoring Department were another

Department—be it the Ministry of Justice or the Cabinet Office—if all the staff did not come from the Health Department, and if one of the other Departments could be involved in the consultation, the establishment and the remit. This is no criticism of her—I know she takes this very seriously—but I advise her to hand this one over to another Department and let them run with it instead.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I understand the right hon. Lady's point and I repeat that the Cabinet Office is closely involved with this at this stage. I think she would consider it most remiss of me were I not to take a close interest as this consultation is taken forward. I cannot say this enough: it is essential that the way in which the inquiry is established inspires confidence in the people affected, and that is what we are trying to achieve through the consultation. As I say, we want to hear from them and we are completely open-minded as to which Department takes responsibility. For now, I want to have those conversations because I want to understand their concerns with what has happened with the Department of Health. As a Minister, I need to give that challenge.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The letter from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) started by expressing gratitude to the Government for the progress made so far. That would have been welcome decades ago, but it is right to acknowledge it now. The letter included three practical points that it put perhaps slightly better than the shadow Minister. The machinery of government cannot work overnight normally and the questions and answers today will help the Government and the Prime Minister decide whether the right solution is, as has been suggested, having another Department or the Cabinet Office take on the consultation with the Department of Health helping as far as it can. The one point for the Department of Health now is whether it can guarantee the third point in the hon. Lady's letter, which is that no records will be destroyed and that they will all be available to the inquiry.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that commitment. Let me reiterate that we have made many documents available in public, all published, and I can give him every assurance that nothing will be destroyed. Having now taken the decision to hold an inquiry, we must get it right. I am happy to hear from hon. Members at any time if they have any specific concerns about whether they think evidence is being withheld, so that I can satisfy myself that that is not the case.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is not a matter of challenging the Minister's personal integrity; that is not in doubt. What is in doubt is the wisdom of the decision to have a Department that is majorly implicated in the concerns about what happened in the past involved at any point in the consultation and in taking the inquiry forward. I hope that before we go into recess an urgent statement can be rushed out advising that the Cabinet Office or the Ministry of Justice will now lead, not only on the outline of the inquiry but on the consultation. Then we can have trust from those who have been involved.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is quite without precedent at this stage—so shortly after announcing an inquiry—for such a decision to be made. It is normal practice for the sponsoring Department to embark on the consultation, and I repeat that the Cabinet Office is closely involved from the perspective of propriety and ethics and the Department of Health is not working alone.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I warmly welcome the fact that the inquiry is now happening, and that the Government made the decision to undertake it, given the decades that have gone past since this issue first came up and the scandal occurred. Will the Minister reassure the victims that, in terms of any judicial involvement, which is almost certain in this case, the identity of the judge concerned will be selected by the Lord Chief Justice, and not by any Government Department?

Jackie Doyle-Price: That would be the normal procedure, so yes, I can give that commitment.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Will the Secretary of State assure us that, in the responsibility of this inquiry, there are real powers, which will enable the inquiry to ensure that it has proper access to all the witnesses and documents necessary? That will be vital to developing a just settlement for all those affected and their families. Can we also have an assurance that a fair financial system will be in place to support them, because this could take some time?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are really looking to settle that question in this consultation. One decision that needs to be taken is exactly what shape the inquiry should take. Clearly, we would normally do this through a statutory inquiry, which would have the powers to which the hon. Lady referred, but equally, Members of the House have made representations that we should have a Hillsborough-style inquiry, which, by definition, would be more fleet of foot. One reason why we are pushing forward with this consultation is to get exactly that feedback, so that we put together an inquiry that inspires confidence among those who have been campaigning for this for so long.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Far from being negative, the Government should be applauded for their very swift action—recently, not in the past. They are listening and have already committed extra compensation, sorted out the complex system that we had before, and announced an inquiry. Can the Minister give an assurance, particularly to my constituents, that the right Department will be chosen, because we do have to give them confidence that we will not all be here again discussing this? We have the chance to sort it out now.

Jackie Doyle-Price: The purpose of the consultation is to allow people to make their points about which Department should be chosen to oversee the inquiry, and then we will respond accordingly. All I can say is: please encourage people to participate in this consultation.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If the consultation with interest groups unanimously says that the inquiry should be held by another Department, will the Minister respect that view?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We need to understand exactly what the concerns are and we will only achieve that through dialogue. I can reiterate that we are here to listen to those concerns. Now that we have decided to go ahead with the inquiry, I want to make sure that we get it right.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): May I put on record how pleased I am, for my constituents and their families, about the commitment to hold this inquiry? I thank the Minister for listening to me on this yesterday. Does she agree that it is only by listening to those most affected that we can finally get the answers that the victims and their families are seeking?

Jackie Doyle-Price: We can only gain from having dialogue. It is in that spirit that we want to have as many conversations with those people affected as possible. It is disappointing that this morning's meeting was not attended, but I hope that, in the future, we will have some meaningful dialogue.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I ask the Minister to reflect on the fact that it is not reasonable to ask campaign groups from Scotland to attend a meeting at two days' notice? May I also point out that there is a distinct legal system in Scotland? Has there been any thought about that or any discussions with Scottish campaign groups and/or the Scottish Government?

Jackie Doyle-Price: As I have said, that was the first of what I hope will be many conversations. Arrangements were made for the campaign groups in Scotland to dial into the meeting, so that they could participate. I have already started discussions with the Scottish Government about how this inquiry will play out and affect the position in Scotland. I am pleased to say that we are having those discussions in a spirit of healthy co-operation. In particular, we are looking at how we can make use of what has already been gone through with the Penrose inquiry. We will continue to have dialogue, and we are very sensitive to those issues.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): At the weekend, I saw my constituent, Sue Wathen, whose case I raised in the debate last week. She was delighted with the Government's commitment. The one issue that she particularly wants to see considered is that of access to appropriate treatments for victims. For most victims, that is the most important issue. Will my hon. Friend feed that back?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That is exactly the sort of thing we need to hear from this consultation when we are setting the scope, and clearly access to treatment is very important. I encourage him to ask his constituent to write in and make those points.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I think there is a consensus across the House, because everyone has made the point very clearly that they do not have confidence in the Department of Health running the inquiry. I expect an announcement from the Minister soon. If the Cabinet Office is appointed, it does have a track record of taking rather a long time with inquiries,

so quite often that is used to kick things into the long grass. Can she assure us that it will be a speedy but thorough inquiry?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The speed at which the inquiry reports will be determined by the chairman, because it will be independent—that is the point. At the moment the Department of Health is leading on conversations, but the inquiry will be independent; it will not be run by the Department of Health.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Health is a devolved matter, so can the Minister give the House a commitment that there will be maximum co-operation with all the devolved institutions across the UK?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can give the hon. Gentleman that commitment. I have already discussed this with the Welsh Minister. It is a UK-wide inquiry and health is a devolved matter, so obviously we will need to work closely to ensure that we all respond to what the inquiry finds.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her statement and commend the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her tenacity on this issue. Although only last December the Northern Ireland Health Minister allocated funding for contaminated blood victims to put us on a par with compensation paid on the UK mainland, it is essential that any UK investigation includes the Northern Ireland victims—I am speaking on their behalf—so that it is not done on an England-and-Wales-only basis. Can she confirm that that will be the case?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are very sensitive to the facts as they apply to Northern Ireland, and we will by all means ensure that the requisite dialogue takes place so that we can deal with it sensitively.

Fox-Sky Merger

11.2 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Fox-Sky merger. Three weeks ago, I came to the House to set out my initial decisions in relation to the proposed merger between 21st Century Fox and Sky plc. Having referred the bid for a phase 1 investigation by Ofcom and the Competition and Markets Authority in March, the decision before me was whether or not to refer the merger to a fuller phase 2 investigation by the CMA.

I told the House then that, following Ofcom's advice, I was minded to refer the merger to the CMA on the grounds of media plurality, and minded not to refer on the grounds of commitment to broadcasting standards. At the same time, I confirmed that I had received a set of undertakings in lieu of referral from the parties and was minded not to accept them.

I also set out the steps that I would follow for the next phase of the decision. I said that, as required by legislation, I would allow the parties to the proposed merger the opportunity to make representations on my position on media plurality. In the interests of transparency and ensuring that all the evidence had been considered, I would allow all interested parties, including the public and parliamentarians, to have their say, particularly on the question of commitment to broadcasting standards. I set last Friday as the deadline.

As the House knows very well, decisions by the Secretary of State on media mergers under the Enterprise Act 2002 are made on a quasi-judicial basis. That means that I must take my decision only on the basis of evidence that is relevant to the specified public interests. I must act independently and follow a process that is scrupulously fair and impartial. I have sought throughout this process to be as transparent and open as possible, and I have kept the House informed at every available opportunity. In keeping with that spirit, I have come to the House today to give as full an update as I possibly can before it rises for the recess.

I can confirm that I have received detailed representations from 21st Century Fox and a letter from Sky, which I will aim to publish, subject to statutory and confidentiality requirements, once I have taken my final decision. I also received a letter from Lachlan and James Murdoch on Friday last week, and a further letter from 21st Century Fox this Monday, which it has since published.

The detailed representations from 21st Century Fox raise a number of points on Ofcom's public interest test report and the analysis underpinning Ofcom's recommendations, contesting Ofcom's view that the transaction raises public interest concerns that justify referral to a phase 2 investigation by the CMA. Neither of the parties has offered any further or amended undertakings in lieu of referral. I have received a substantial number of responses in relation to my referral decision.

In coming to my decision on this case, I must take account of all relevant representations made to me. As a result, my final decision on referral can be made only after I have fully considered all relevant evidence on both the plurality and the commitment to broadcasting standards grounds. Given that the consultation closed

[Karen Bradley]

only on Friday, there has not been time to consider all the representations, and I am not in a position today to make my final decision on referral.

What I can do, however, is confirm to the House that, having carefully reviewed the parties' representations, and in the absence of further proposed undertakings, I am currently still minded to refer on the media plurality ground and still minded not to accept the undertakings in lieu of a referral.

To be clear, as I have said, I must fully consider all relevant representations before reaching a final decision, and I will take the time I need to look at the many I have received, balancing the need for careful consideration of relevant evidence with the merger parties' legitimate need for a prompt decision. However, I have prioritised considering the parties' representations and the detailed points they have made to me. While some of the points they have raised may benefit from closer examination by the CMA at phase 2 in the event that the merger is referred, there was nothing in their representations that, at this stage, has led me to change my mind about the appropriateness of referral. Unless new evidence from other representations changes my mind in the coming weeks, the bid will therefore be referred to a phase 2 review on at least one ground—media plurality. I thought it would be helpful to set out my current view to the House, given the public interest in this case, and also to the parties so that they can be as clear as possible about my intentions and the likely next steps for this bid.

Bearing in mind the obligation to act promptly as part of this quasi-judicial process, I expect I will be in a position to come to a final decision on referral, including in respect of the broadcasting standard ground, in the coming weeks, and potentially during summer recess. Should this prove to be the case, and as I did previously where stages of the merger have taken place outside of the House sitting, I will write to the parties informing them of my decision, as well as to the Leaders and Speakers of both Houses, to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and to the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, whom I was pleased to see reappointed last week.

As I have said previously, I trust that making this statement to the House gives another welcome opportunity to discuss this important issue, and further cements my undertaking to ensure openness and transparency. I commend this statement to the House.

11.7 am

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, good morning to you. As this is the last day before the recess, I thank you and your staff for the welcome you have given my new colleagues who were elected in the general election.

I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I am grateful to her for returning to the House before the recess to update us on progress—even if there is not much progress to update us on. The last day of term is sometimes called “Take out the trash day”. Well, this appears to be “Keep the trash in the office day”. Nevertheless, this is one piece of Government indecision that we welcome. It is right that the Secretary of State has taken her quasi-judicial responsibilities seriously.

She will be aware that, whatever decisions she makes, there is a strong possibility of judicial review by one side or the other. No doubt that has influenced her decision to tread carefully and slowly, and we respect her for that.

The lawyers at 21st Century Fox have already written a somewhat intimidating letter to the Secretary of State, trying to bounce her into a decision. We know that that aggression is the Murdochs' modus operandi; we have been on the receiving end of it in this House, and we urge the Secretary of State to keep standing firm. In particular, there is absolutely no need for the Secretary of State to announce a decision during the summer recess. Parliament must have the opportunity to scrutinise any decision she makes. It is not her job to operate to 21st Century Fox's corporate timetable; it has to abide by the parliamentary timetable. She should demonstrate to the company that she, as an elected representative of the people, is in charge, not 21st Century Fox.

Last time the Secretary of State came to this House, she said that she was minded to refer the bid to a phase 2 investigation on grounds of media plurality, as she said again this morning, but that she was not minded to refer on grounds of broadcasting standards. She then said that she had invited representations on both grounds by last Friday. It is right that a phase 2 investigation on media plurality grounds goes ahead, but the broadcasting standards investigation should go ahead too. Compelling arguments for that have been made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). Does the Secretary of State agree that that is as distinguished a cross-party alliance as anyone can imagine? Does she also agree that it is absurd that Ofcom is currently refusing to meet my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North so that he can share his concerns with it?

The truth is that the Murdochs have a history of regulatory non-compliance and of corporate governance failure, and that calls their commitment to broadcasting standards into serious question. Ofcom itself says that there are significant concerns about Fox's approach to ensuring Fox News content compliance with the broadcasting code. We saw in the phone hacking scandal that senior employees and executives at News International failed to comply with the criminal law, with acceptable standards of journalistic conduct, and, frankly, with basic human decency. We see the ongoing sexual and racist harassment at Fox News in the United States, where very senior employees behaved appallingly over decades and nothing was done—evidence of what Ofcom calls “significant corporate failure”.

Of course, the best way to get to the bottom of this corporate failure would be to proceed with the inquiry that has already been promised and that is specifically intended to look into it—part 2 of the Leveson inquiry. Will the Secretary of State undertake today to get on and just do it? I note that, although the Conservative manifesto promised not to go ahead with Leveson 2, a recent parliamentary answer to me indicated that the Government are still considering the consultation on it. I hope that this is another of the Prime Minister's many dropped manifesto commitments. It is not too

late for the Secretary of State to do the right thing, and if she does go ahead with Leveson 2, she will have our full support.

The influence of the Murdochs on this Government is still a matter of serious concern. Only this week, in a letter to me, the First Secretary of State refused to deny that Rupert Murdoch had asked the Prime Minister to put the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) back into the Cabinet. I expected the allegation to be denied. It was not denied. We will be drawing our own conclusions from that. I have consistently—persistently—asked the Secretary of State to publish the minutes of the meeting between the Prime Minister and Rupert Murdoch in the US in 2016. Will she commit to do that now?

The Secretary of State now has the opportunity to demonstrate that we live in a democracy, not a Murdochocracy. Will she now undertake to prove who is in charge by not making any decision until the House returns in September?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions and I will attempt to address as many as I can in the time that we have; there were a number of questions there—I am sure he would agree.

I think it is worth my repeating that I am acting in a quasi-judicial basis under the Enterprise Act. We are also reflecting, in our behaviour as a Government, the recommendations of Sir Brian Leveson in his part 1 report, where he was very clear about the way in which Government should operate in relation to media mergers. We have been cognisant of those recommendations throughout.

One of the things that I am required to do under the Enterprise Act is to act without undue delay, in the interests of all parties. That is why I am here today to say that nothing I have seen so far has changed my mind, but I am going to look at all the representations that I have received, which are in the tens of thousands. Many of them are identical, I have to say, but they all need to be looked at, and I will do so in order to see what evidence they provide.

I was also clear that the Ofcom report on the commitment to broadcasting standards test was clear. It was unequivocal. There were no grounds on which I could refer. I am therefore looking at whether new, substantive evidence comes to light following my statement. I will ensure that I consider all the representations. However, in the interests of all parties, I will have to make sufficiently speedy progress in making a decision to ensure that we can deal with these matters in line with the Enterprise Act. That may mean I have to make a decision before Parliament returns, which is why I am in the Chamber today being as open and transparent as I can be. I want to ensure that I am as clear as I can be with Parliament and with colleagues about the situation.

The hon. Gentleman asked a question about the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), whose letter I had sight of this morning. As I understand it, the right hon. Gentleman has asked for a meeting with Ofcom to discuss its report on the fit and proper test, and I am surprised that Ofcom is not able to meet him to do so. The fit and proper test is not part of what I have to look at—the test under the Enterprise Act is different: it is about the commitment to broadcasting

standards, not the fit and proper test. Ofcom has to undertake an assessment of whether a company is fit and proper on an ongoing basis. I am surprised that it is not willing to meet the right hon. Gentleman and other parliamentarians, but I am sure it will have heard my comments on that matter in the House.

All Ministers' meetings with journalists are minuted—sorry; recorded—and the meetings that they have had are in the public domain.

I will be as open and as transparent as I possibly can be, which is why I am in the Chamber today. I had hoped it would be possible to announce a firmer decision today, but the quantity and volume of the representations received mean that that simply has not been possible.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for not becoming a party to the socialist vendetta against the Murdoch family? When considering media plurality, will she bear in mind that there were four channels when Sky launched, but that there are now hundreds, and that the real opponent of media plurality is the bloated—taxpayer-funded—BBC, which likes to give millions of pounds to presenters some of us have never heard of?

Karen Bradley: I know you do not want me to stray on to the BBC, Mr Speaker, so I will not respond to that point. The report that I asked Ofcom to prepare as part of the phase 1 inquiry found firm grounds for concerns about media plurality. In the absence of further representations with evidence that might change my view, it is important to say that I am still minded to refer the merger on the grounds of media plurality. Should I make the final decision to refer the merger for a phase 2 investigation, the Competition and Markets Authority will be able to flush out the evidence on all those points.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I want to join colleagues in wishing you, Mr Speaker, and your excellent staff in the House a very good summer recess. All SNP MPs wish you well for the summer recess. I also want to congratulate England's women on their resounding win over Scotland last night. The 6-0 result was excellent. We put up a good fight, but unfortunately it was not enough on this occasion.

I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. She will be aware of my specific constituency concern, given that Sky is the largest private employer there. My constituents who work at Sky will want to know that any deal is properly scrutinised and that their jobs will be secure.

Three weeks ago, the Ofcom report stated that the public had serious concerns about the concentration of media ownership in fewer and fewer hands. We share the public's concern about that and about the dilution of the diversification of media content. At the time, we welcomed the fact that the Secretary of State was minded to refer this to the Competition and Markets Authority on the grounds of diminishing plurality in the UK media. We still believe that that would bolster public confidence, and we very much believe it should happen.

We welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has come to the House and delivered her statement, but we are very disappointed that there has been no final decision. We understand the need to examine

[*Hannah Bardell*]

representations from all parties, but the fact that a decision is likely to be made during the summer recess speaks to a developing pattern. As we saw during the election, there is a developing pattern in the making of major decisions, and it is not good governance. The decision has been kicked into the long grass, and Members of this House will not get an opportunity to scrutinise it. The Committees of the House have yet to sit, and there should be an opportunity for the relevant Committees to scrutinise any decision made. Plurality and transparency within the media should be one of the Secretary of State's key motivations, but it seems that a decision will not be subject to maximum transparency when it comes to telling the House. Given that it looks as though she is running away from scrutiny, will she commit to making a decision when the House is back from summer recess so that we can properly scrutinise the deal?

Karen Bradley: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating England's women. I am disappointed for her sake that the wearing of a football shirt did not produce the luck for which she hoped for Scotland's women, but as an England woman I am delighted by the result.

The hon. Lady has a constituency interest, with Sky being the largest employer in her constituency. I, too, want to make sure that the merger is properly scrutinised and dealt with so that we have certainty for employees such as her constituents. She says that we have shied away from taking decisions with full scrutiny, but that is simply not the case. For example, I originally asked Ofcom to report to me on Sky in May, and I delayed the date of the report until after the election campaign so that I could come to the House. I had hoped to be here today making a final decision, but the sheer volume of representations—all of which I need to go through, even though a large number of them are identical campaign emails—means that I cannot make that decision today. I have to make the decision with due consideration of time, because it is important for the parties to the merger and all concerned that a decision is taken.

Mr Speaker: It is, I think, the Secretary of State's first appearance at the Dispatch Box since the Wimbledon final last Sunday. I am sure she will want to congratulate the great Roger Federer on his new record—the latest of many records established by the great man over the last 14 years.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the openness and transparency at the heart of the statement. Media plurality is vital, and transparency is vital. On pay within the media, would she like to remind all employers that we have equal pay laws which state that people from all backgrounds doing the same job should be paid equally?

Karen Bradley: Of course I will join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating Roger Federer. I was lucky enough to see him play on Friday, and I know you were there as well. I should also congratulate Lewis Hamilton. I was, unfortunately, not able to be at the Wimbledon final because I was at the grand prix, where I was able to congratulate Mr Hamilton personally on his great success. Four British grands prix in a row is a fantastic achievement. I am sure the whole House will join me in celebrating

what is turning into the most incredible summer of sport for Britain and British athletes—and Roger Federer. I think he is almost an honorary Brit at this stage.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies); I think Wimbledon is one of the places that have equal pay for men and women. I want to see gender disparity removed from all employers, and I was as surprised as she was by yesterday's annual report.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Culture Secretary has just shown us why she has an enviable job in Government. She is the Minister for tickets, as well as for many other things. May I wish you—and your staff, as seems to be the fashion—a happy summer, Mr Speaker?

I welcome what the Secretary of State said about plurality and the fact that she is minded to refer on plurality grounds. I welcome what she said to Ofcom about meeting me and colleagues regarding the fit and proper issue. She needs to make the decision on broadcasting standards in a timely way, but she needs to look at some detailed issues. When she invited representations, she said in her statement to the House that she wanted new evidence, or evidence on Ofcom's approach. My argument, and that of my right hon. and hon. colleagues, is that Ofcom's approach is flawed and that she needs to do what it did not, which is to look at the evidence—including the evidence about Fox and the *News of the World*—on the basis of the right legal threshold; look at the evidence about James Murdoch, which she asked it to do and it failed to do; and, indeed, look at the wider concerns about Sky News becoming like Fox News. I think that that will take a bit of time.

On those grounds, as well as those of parliamentary accountability—she has shown a desire all along to be accountable and open to Parliament on this issue—the Secretary of State can come back at the beginning of September, after having a good summer and scrutinising these issues, and tell us her decision. That is the right thing to do, and she should not, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East has said, give in to the old tricks of the Murdochs, which are to bully people into making wrong and rushed decisions.

Karen Bradley: I should wish you a happy summer, Mr Speaker, as it appears that that is the order of the day. [*Interruption.*] And Roger, of course.

I have been as transparent as possible. As I said in my statement, I may make a decision over the course of the summer recess, but it may take longer. I am taking the time to consider all representations, including the right hon. Gentleman's, those of the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and those of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is not in his place. I will look at the evidence and make a decision on that basis.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): In my right hon. Friend's previous statement, she emphasised that it was indeed the evidence that she would look at, and she mentioned quality not quantity. She has said in today's statement that part of the reason for the delay is the volume of communication she has received; she mentioned tens of thousands of items. What percentage of those tens of thousands of items were roughly original evidence and what was simply 38 Degrees or similar emails, which are all identical and not original?

Karen Bradley: I am not able at this stage to give precise figures, but of the more than 10,000 responses that have already been coded and looked at, a very large number were identical. I said in my previous statement that I would look not at those who shouted loudest but at those who provided the evidence. It is a shame that I opened my inbox one morning to find 10,000 unread messages on this matter, almost all of which were identical. That gets in the way of my being able to be a constituency MP; constituents' messages could simply get lost in those many tens of thousands. Clearly, however, I have to look at all those representations, but it is a shame that people who, in good faith, want to have their voice heard get drowned out by those who simply press a button and send an automatic message.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that she will not proceed to a decision until she has received a report from the Information Commissioner that the 13 million datasets that will be handed over to Fox as a result of the takeover cannot be misused or misapplied for political purposes? She will know that that concern was raised recently by senior Members of another place.

Karen Bradley: I am aware of those concerns. The right hon. Gentleman will know from his previous role as Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, which has been replaced by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the terms of the Enterprise Act 2002 on the pieces of evidence I can look at. On the public interest test, it is very clear about what evidence I can look at.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that British broadcasting regulations mean that even a hypothetical Fox News UK would be a very different broadcaster from the US version?

Karen Bradley: Broadcasters in the United Kingdom have to comply with the broadcasting code. There are very strict rules and regulations. They are regulated by Ofcom and the broadcasting landscape is very different from that of other countries.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): This is the second urgent question today in which the issues have been openness, transparency and trust. The importance of obtaining that public trust and buy-in to the decision that the Secretary of State is going to make means that it is absolutely essential that it comes back to Parliament. May I also remind the House that the BBC has never been investigated for phone hacking or other breaches of honesty and decency?

Karen Bradley: Just to be clear, I have come here of my own volition—this is a statement, not an urgent question—to be as open and transparent as I can. I wanted to be able to make a decision before the House rose for the summer recess, but it simply has not been possible. I will now take time to look at the representations and ensure that we make the right decision. However, my “minded to” decision, about which I came to talk to the House three weeks ago, has not changed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Does she appreciate the great concern about the supposed impartiality of the media, which is fostered by independent news stations? That

concern is felt by many, if not all hon. Members. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to allay those fears about impartiality in the media?

Karen Bradley: All broadcasting, including the BBC now, is regulated by Ofcom. There is an obligation on all broadcasters to be impartial. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman alerts Ofcom to instances in which he feels that that has not been the case, and I would be happy to be copied in so that I am aware of his concerns.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): There is a great deal of disappointment that the Secretary of State has not yet committed to come back to the House to explain matters to Parliament and allow the scrutiny and transparency that she says are so important. The need for speed should not undermine the democratic process, so will she reassure us that she will not allow that to happen?

Karen Bradley: I have been as transparent as I possibly can within the confines of the parliamentary calendar. However, the parliamentary calendar cannot be allowed to dictate what I do in my quasi-judicial role as Secretary of State. I will continue to be as open and transparent as I can and I will ensure that Parliament is fully informed of any decisions I make. I am always happy, when Parliament is sitting, to come to the Chamber and for my decisions to be scrutinised.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State, certainly for the first part of the statement, which was about deferring the decision to refer. If she is having problems with her emails, such as getting 10,000 from 38 Degrees, I will happily take her ticket for Wimbledon so that she can spend more time in the office.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). The issue is very serious for us all, and certainly for the public. There is clear evidence of significant corporate failure and—dare I say it?—systemic operational problems with corporate governance. That takes much more time to tackle. Given the gravity of the matter, we cannot rely on just receiving a summer postcard notifying us of the decision. I urge the Secretary of State to wait six weeks and have the decency to announce the decision to the House.

Karen Bradley: As I have said, commercial decisions, a quasi-judicial process and the terms of the Enterprise Act 2002 are not defined by the parliamentary calendar. If I make a decision before Parliament returns, I will go through the process, as I have done previously, of notifying the Leaders and Speakers of both Houses, the Chair of the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the hon. Member for West Bromwich East. It may be the case that I make the decision when we return; I simply do not want hon. Members to expect one thing or the other.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If the Secretary of State had to make the decision today, what is in her mind? Is she for it or against it?

Karen Bradley: First, I should have welcomed the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) back to the Chamber—my apologies for not doing so. My decision so far is that I am minded to refer on the basis of media plurality. I have not moved on that, but I have not yet made a final decision.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Although I appreciate the Secretary of State's offer of sending me a letter during the recess if she makes a decision, I am sure that she understands that it is never the same as seeing her in person. Will she commit to making herself available to appear before the Select Committee, perhaps in September if it is formed, to discuss her handling of the matter if she has made a decision by then?

Karen Bradley: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his re-election as Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Of course, I am always happy to be called by the Select Committee to give evidence.

Business of the House

11.34 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): With permission, I should like to make a statement about the business for the week commencing 4 September.

MONDAY 4 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

TUESDAY 5 SEPTEMBER—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Telecommunications Infrastructure (Relief from Non-Domestic Rates) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 6 SEPTEMBER—Motion to approve ways and means resolutions relating to the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

FRIDAY 8 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 September will include:

MONDAY 11 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of Second Reading of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 7 September will be:

THURSDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Debate on the transparency of the BBC followed by a debate on 16-19 education funding.

I congratulate all Members from across the House who presented their private Member's Bills yesterday. I know that many of them are on subjects that Members care deeply about, and I wish them well. I can confirm that, through the usual channels, the Opposition have been offered an Opposition day in the short September sitting, and we also plan to provide further Opposition days in October and November.

Finally, as this is the last business questions before the summer recess, may I send my best wishes to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and colleagues across the House for a productive, and also a restorative, summer break from Parliament? I also thank the hard-working staff of the House, whose efforts in supporting us are greatly appreciated by colleagues on both sides of the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am sure the whole House will join the Leader of the House in thanking the hard-working staff who look after us so well and wish them a restful time over the summer without us.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. I am afraid I have not been informed of any Opposition day—not even a careless whisper. Let me make it clear again: the Opposition had to call a debate on Monday because there was no discussion with the Government on our right to have those Opposition days. The Government need not have had that debate; they could have said, “Yes, have your Opposition day on Monday.”

This is a Government struggling to get a grip. Back Benchers are calling for the sacking of the “donkey Ministers”, with Tory grandes describing them as ferrets in a sack. The EU knows that the current Government are without authority, with the Prime Minister having to call for calm. Is this the image of the country that we want to present to the world?

The Conservatives do not want to debate major policy issues; they would rather discuss the leadership crisis than debate or appoint to their Select Committees. We already have our Chairs in place and have decided our membership of the Committees. The Chairs could have called a meeting this week to set out their programme, and then had a meeting in the next sitting. The public cannot even present their petitions.

In the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), he said:

“I have found a group of middle-aged men protecting their egos in a bid to take over from a lame duck Prime Minister.”—[*Official Report*, 17 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 628.]

The Leader of the House in her subsequent point of order confirmed that she is one of the group trying to take over, and did not even support her Prime Minister by saying that she was not a lame duck Prime Minister: still the nasty party. This obviously is a Portillo moment: not putting in the phone lines, but a run on SIM cards. I would contrast that and seven years of a Government who are not working for the many with our vision for all stages of life spelled out in 124 pages of a manifesto that is on its third reprint. [*Interruption.*] I have five minutes.

The electorate believed us, not the robotic tautological mantras. That is why we need an Opposition debate to clarify some myths. Let me list some. Who actually is responsible for the financial crash? Not the Labour party. [*Interruption.*] Listen. The United States investment bank Bear Stearns collapsed in March 2008. In September 2008, Lehman Brothers collapsed. The problem was cheap money, house price bubbles, financial deregulation and sub-prime mortgages—remember those?

May we also have a debate on the NHS, please? Last week, a point of order was raised suggesting that my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) had described the NHS as a Labour institution. What she actually said was that it was a Labour-created institution. I refer hon. Members to the excellent book, “Nye: the political life of Aneurin Bevan” by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), and to chapter 10, page 133, which deals with the creation of the NHS. Let us contrast that with the book written by the Secretary of State for Health, who wants to privatise the NHS.

What about a debate on that other myth—namely, that the deficit is larger under a Labour Government? The deficit is the difference between what the Government spend and what they receive. According to House of Commons Library information based on Office for Budget Responsibility and Office for National Statistics figures, the sum of all annual deficits between 1997 and 2010 was £437 billion, or £506 billion after adjusting for inflation. However, the sum of all annual deficits between 2010 and 2017 was £690 billion, or £728 billion after adjusting for inflation.

As women seem to be in the news at the moment, I want to mention some notable women who have passed away recently and to whom we have not yet paid tribute. Simone Veil was born in France and sent to Auschwitz. She carried the camp number that was tattooed on her arm. As a result of her experiences, she was passionate about peace in Europe and became the first female president of the European Parliament and established a woman’s right to choose in France, in very difficult circumstances. Sheila Michaels promoted the use of the

title “Ms”. Maryam Mirzakhani became, in 2014, the first woman under 40 ever to win the Fields Medal for mathematics. Mary Turner was a trade unionist who fought for all of us to have a better life. She started her working life as a dinner lady and became president of the GMB, president of the TUC and chair of the Labour party. She was a giant of the Labour movement. She was formidable, and I can only ever remember her smiling. She will be sadly missed.

Those women’s inspiration lives on in the six schoolgirls from the Afghan robotics team who beat the Trump ban and took silver in the first global robotics event, as well as in England’s cricket team in the world cup final and our football team in Euro 2017 this Sunday. I think that the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) played alongside some of the Scottish team. Maybe she should have been in the team! This month we also celebrate 100 years of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. And not only can we drive trains, but we are now driving the Tardis.

I want to thank everyone from the Speaker’s Office, the Speaker and all the Deputy Speakers, the Office of the Clerks, and the Doorkeepers, all of whom make our lives very easy. I also want to thank *Hansard*, the House of Commons Library and of course all our staff. I say to every hon. Member on both sides of the House that we had a very difficult time during the lockdown and we then went straight into the general election. I know that it has been very difficult, and I wish every Member, new and old, a peaceful and restful summer.

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in celebrating the achievements of women, not least yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker and the shadow Leader of the House. I also welcome the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her position as the new shadow Deputy Leader of the House. I wish her every success and look forward to working with her. I want to add one other great lady to those on that lovely list, who I am delighted to join in celebrating. It is Jane Austen, who will feature on the new £10 note. She is one of our greatest living authors—[*Laughter.*] Greatest ever authors! I think many of us wish that she were still living; I absolutely share that sentiment. It is fantastic that we are at last starting to recognise this.

It has been a problem that the Opposition have sought to criticise process at a time when in fact there has just been business as usual in a new Parliament. The general election took place in June, and we have had 18 sitting days so far. Six of them were given over to the Queen’s Speech debate, whose topics for debate were selected by the Opposition. That leaves 12 sitting days, during which we have had three debates under Standing Order No. 24, 10 urgent questions, 17 Adjournment debates, 19 oral statements and 21 departmental oral questions sessions. In addition, this is our fifth—hopefully feisty—business questions session in the Chamber. I am sure that the shadow Leader of the House will look forward, as I do, to the normal Committees of the House getting up and running as soon as we get back in September.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I thank the Leader of the House for her efforts to get business on track as quickly as possible? Connected to that, as Select Committee memberships will finally be

[*Dr Julian Lewis*]

settled on the first day back, which is the Tuesday, may we have an assurance that the relevant motion will be tabled at the earliest possible opportunity, namely the Wednesday, so that we can have meetings in the first week back? That would enable us to get approval, possibly even for public hearings in the normal way, in the second week back, rather than having to wait until October.

Andrea Leadsom: We all share my right hon. Friend's desire to get the Select Committees up and running. He will be aware that the 1922 committee has some say in holding elections for the Conservative Committee members. We are all keen to see those elections, and I am sure that they will be held as soon as possible.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the start of the *Daily Mail* fortnight. We break for the long summer recess in a matter of hours, but the Select Committees are still not up and running and we still do not know the arrangements for Standing Committees. Every single piece of business has had to be taken on the Floor of the House. Regardless of what the Leader of the House said, we could have done all that—we have always done it. I have never known a Parliament so lax in putting together the normal structures and arrangements of the House, so the Leader of the House should vow and pledge that one of her priorities for when we come back in September will be to get this House back working properly.

At least we made it to the summer recess pretty much intact and with a Prime Minister in place. I do not know a group of people more in need of a summer holiday than this beleaguered Conservative party and its Government. A couple of weeks in the sun might quell their feuding desires and put a stop to the leadership contests. With their daiquiris and margaritas in hand, they might even agree to a temporary ceasefire to some of the briefings and counter-briefings across Whitehall. However, this might be the last summer bar one for the ordinary freedom of movement right across Europe. All sorts of special arrangements might be put in place for our constituents in 2019 as they try to enjoy their time on the costas and the playas but, as the repeal Bill comes forward, we see the reality of the hard Brexit as we move closer to it. We should therefore ensure that we can enjoy our summer holidays unburdened by having to worry about freedom of movement.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all in the Speaker's Office the best possible summer recess. I extend that sentiment to the Leader of the House, who has been kind and courteous to me since she became the Leader of the House, and to my friend the shadow Leader of the House. We have not done too badly as a team over the course of the past few weeks. I also extend that to staff right across the House. We have become so accustomed to being looked after so diligently and so well, and they have kept us safe. It has been one hell of a year, so I wish my colleagues all the best over the next few weeks.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. We all share that desire to come back ready to go, having had a break, and with a new vigour to make the most of leaving the EU in a way that works

for the entire United Kingdom. The negotiations will obviously be tough and will require us to work together to achieve success. As I have said both privately and in the Chamber, I am keen to work across the House to enable ways of improving the legislation and to ensure that we get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Thanks to the Prime Minister's insistence that the salaries of those who earn over £150,000 working for the BBC ought to be declared, I learned today that a gentleman called Derek Thompson, who apparently plays Charlie in "Casualty", earns up to £400,000 a year, and yet real nurses earn around £23,000 a year. There is a double—[*Interruption.*] I am getting to that. There is a double injustice when somebody who makes real life and death decisions on a daily basis earns a fraction of the salary of an actor playing somebody who makes such decisions. May we have a debate as soon as possible about top-slicing £1 billion from the BBC's taxpayer licence fee revenue and giving it to the national health service and people who really deserve bigger salaries?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We have had a lot of discussions about public sector pay and about people who are just about managing. It has been a difficult number of years in which this Government have been trying to deal with the deficit and the debt that we were left in 2010, and it has been a case of trying to balance giving decent pay rises to our public sector workers, who do such a good job for us, with trying to make sure that we live within our means.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about BBC pay, the pay of actors and so on, and about the Government urging transparency in pay. We were successful with boardroom pay and now with BBC salaries, and all Members will want to see more clarity around what is fair, both between women and men and between different public sector workers.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation this morning delivered a major speech to a think-tank, Reform, setting out major developments in the Higher Education and Research Bill. He did that not having made an oral statement in this House, not having laid a written ministerial statement in this House and not having spent any time in his 32-minute speech yesterday on this area alluding to those developments.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you might think, I might think and many of us might think that that is a contempt and abuse of this House. It is the second year running that this Government have tried to make major statements about higher education on the last day of term, with the intention of evading scrutiny. Will the Leader of the House prevail upon the Universities Minister or another Minister to come to the House today and explain why, for example, the Government will make major changes to the teaching excellence framework, for which they are laying material today, and the Office for Students? [*Interruption.*] The chuntering Whip says from a sedentary position, "It is far too long". We have had far too little from—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We do not need "chuntering" Whips. I know that the question is too long; I am sure the hon. Gentleman will now conclude.

Gordon Marsden: May we therefore make sure that the Universities Minister or some Minister actually turns up today to say something about that speech and those developments this morning?

Andrea Leadsom: In the hon. Gentleman’s “speech” on the subject, he made a number of very important points. On his substantive point about a speech that the Universities Minister has given, there was, of course, a three-hour debate in this Chamber yesterday, so he will be aware that the Universities Minister talked about current policy.

The Government’s record on universities has been exemplary, with more students going to university, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds—up by more than 40% since 2010.

The hon. Gentleman criticises the number of written statements brought forward at the end of term, so I just point out that in 2007 there were 30 written statements; in 2008, there were also 30; in 2009, there were 33; and today I believe there are 22. Of course, as he will appreciate, it is vital for many Departments that they bring forward important—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman asked a serious question. The Leader of the House is answering it. It is simply rude to shout.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The point that I was trying to make was that, as the hon. Gentleman and indeed all hon. Members will know, it is important that hon. Members get the chance to see the last update possible before the House rises, so that they have the latest information, Department by Department.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Early-day motion 189 on Krishna Maharaj’s federal evidentiary hearing in Florida has the support of many Members.

[That this House recalls parliamentary support over 20 years for Florida and the US’ reviews of the 1987 murder convictions and sentencing of British citizen Krishna Maharaj, born on 26 January 1939, including asking for the overturning of the initial death sentence, for an appeal on the grounds of innocence and defects in the investigation, of ineffective defence representation and of significant concerns in the prosecution, including critical non-disclosures and of questions about the conduct of the original judges; welcomes the recent Federal Appeal Court order for a full evidentiary hearing by the Federal Court in the state of Florida; notes the helpful initiative by hon. Members and Members of the House of Lords for the Amicus Brief in support of Reprieve and its director Clive Stafford Smith who are making the case for the issue of innocence to be sufficient reason for Krishna Maharaj to be released after 30 years of imprisonment; and trusts that the evidence and arguments for innocence will now be considered effectively and fairly.]

May I suggest to the Leader of the House that the Foreign Office be encouraged to work with Clive Stafford Smith of Reprieve to help the Americans to decide that innocence is a sufficient ground to release Krishna Maharaj after 30 years, after they have had the hearing?

On early-day motion 207, can we have a debate on leasehold and commonhold legislative reform and sector regulation? We need to make sure that responsibility for

commonhold moves from the Ministry of Justice to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, that the abuses of the leasehold sector are stamped out and that effective advice is given both to those who are doing the abuse and to those who will benefit when that abuse has ended.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not completely aware of the issues that my hon. Friend raises, but he will be aware that there is a pre-recess debate this afternoon. He might want to raise those issues then.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Dangerous driving is a blight on the roads of my Bradford South constituency. The consultation of the Ministry of Justice on strengthening the punishment for drivers who kill or seriously injure others on our roads closed on 1 February 2017. Is the Leader of the House aware of when the outcome of that consultation will be published? Will she commit to making parliamentary time available to debate that important matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a critical point about dangerous driving. She is right that many of us have experienced the awful tragedies and outcomes of dangerous driving. On her behalf, I will look into when we can expect to see a response.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): The United Nations Human Rights Council special rapporteur on Sri Lanka published a report following his recent visit to that country, in which he described progress on fulfilling resolution 30/1 as “slow” and the use of torture in Sri Lanka as “endemic”. Can we have a debate in Government time on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka in the lead-up to the next session of the UNHCR in the autumn?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has done a lot of work in this area, and I congratulate him on his new position as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group. The Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field), has registered our serious concerns about the special rapporteur’s findings with the Sri Lankan high commissioner this week, and the FCO’s annual human rights report, which is published today, sets out our full assessment of the situation. I assure my hon. Friend that we continue to encourage the Sri Lankan Government to deliver against all their UN Human Rights Council commitments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): News has recently emerged that the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church has been released after 10 years’ incommunicado house detention. He appeared at a mass on 16 July, following an alleged reconciliation with the Eritrean Government. The mass was billed as a celebration of that reconciliation and as an indication of his release from detention but, according to local sources, Patriarch Antonios was surrounded by guards, did not speak at the event and has made no statement about the supposed reconciliation. That has led many human rights organisations to believe that Patriarch Antonios has not been released but, rather, that his sudden reappearance is an attempt by the Eritrean Government to alleviate international pressure. Will the Leader of the House

[Jim Shannon]

allow for a statement on the discussions between the Government and the Eritrean Government on how Patriarch Antonios's detention still continues?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman, as he often does, raises an important human rights issue, which I urge him to take up at the next Foreign Office questions as a very specific issue to which those Ministers will be able to respond.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Although I welcome the clarity we now have on phase 2b of the High Speed 2 rail project, I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree it is unacceptable that my residents, some of whom have lived in the same home for more than 40 years, are being offered just two thirds of the value of their property. Will she therefore consider a debate in Government time immediately after the summer recess to scrutinise the property compensation schemes that are now on offer?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises the important issue of compensation for those affected. I have taken up a number of cases in my South Northamptonshire constituency, so I am very sympathetic to her. I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has said that he will take up individual cases, and I urge my hon. Friend to contact him about her specific points.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Two women a week are murdered at the hands of their current partner or ex-partner, many of whom have had previous histories of abuse and stalking. The Home Office produced a consultation paper last December, recommending introducing new legislation, including a stalkers register. In this year's Queen's Speech, the issue of domestic violence was mentioned, yet we have seen no legislation about this issue nearly a year after the consultation. Is it not about time the Government found time for us to debate this issue and allowed the House to vote on it, because we face a very serious situation?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this is an incredibly serious issue. He will know that tackling the horrors of domestic violence and domestic abuse is an absolute priority for the Prime Minister, and that the Queen's Speech mentioned that we intend to introduce legislation on this issue in this Session.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I know that the Leader of the House agrees with me that strengthening families and giving every child the best start in life are very much the business of government, given the cost of family breakdown and the impact that the early years and family relationships can have on children's mental health and life chances. A number of Conservative colleagues will be producing a families manifesto in the first week of September, immediately after the recess, providing the Government with practical and realistic policies that could make a significant difference in this area. Could parliamentary time be found to debate this important issue in the days after the recess?

Andrea Leadsom: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I commend her on the work she is doing. She and I share a passion for ensuring that all children have the best start in life, and I would love to

see her families manifesto when it is published. She will be pleased to know that all Departments are committed to making progress, including the Department of Health, which has committed an additional £1.4 billion for mental health services for children, young people and new mothers for this Parliament. That will make a huge difference to families.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We are now too late for the implementation of the draft Value Added Tax (Refund of Tax to Museums and Galleries) (Amendment) Order 2017, which was announced as a provision in the Budget in March 2016. Glasgow Women's Library in my constituency applied for this and was informed in September last year that it was successful, but it is still waiting for the Government to act. This measure was supposed to come into force in June. The library stands to lose tens of thousands of pounds if it cannot claim back and backdate under this provision the VAT for capital works it has carried out. Will the Leader of the House give some certainty as to when this statutory instrument will come before the House and when other galleries and museums listed under early-day motion 224—about 30 across the whole UK—will actually be able to make use of this provision?

[That this House notes that the draft Value Added Tax (Refund of Tax to Museums and Galleries) (Amendment) Order 2017 has not yet been laid before the House; understands that the draft Order was announced in the Budget on 16 March 2016, the consultation closed on 21 April 2017 and that the Order was due to come into force under the negative resolution procedure on 1 June 2017; believes that the Order will provide revenue that is vitally important to many museums, including the Athelstan Museum, Burns House Museum, Callendar House, Cumbernauld Museum, Dean Castle, Dick Institute, Elgin Museum, Glasgow Women's Library, Kilsyth Heritage, King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, North Lanarkshire Heritage Centre, the Pier Arts Centre, Pittencrieff House Museum, the Regimental Museum of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, Shotts Heritage Centre, Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stockwood Discovery Centre, Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life, the Fergusson Gallery, Wardown Park Museum, the West Highland Museum, the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, the Royal Academy of the Arts, the Royal College of Music, the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, Towner Art Gallery, the University of Nottingham and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park; and calls on the Government to lay the Order for the approval of Parliament prior to the Summer recess.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is raising an important point, which clearly has significant relevance in her constituency. If she would like to write to me about it, I will be able to look into it further for her.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate on electoral fraud, including double voting? Understandably, all MPs have a personal interest in this, especially if their constituency is a marginal one. I realise that the Electoral Commission watches us carefully, but such a debate just might concentrate minds a little.

Andrea Leadsom: This is a very important point. We have one of the oldest and proudest democracies in the world, and it is important that we continue to have

rigorous electoral processes that cannot be fraudulently abused. I am sure my hon. Friend will find a way to have that debate and I encourage him to do so.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will doubtless be aware that today the Transport Secretary has issued a written statement saying that electrification of the line between Cardiff and Swansea will now not be taking place. That has huge significance—not just for my constituency, but for constituencies right across the south Wales belt. Will she find time when we come back for the brief period before the conference recess for the Transport Secretary to come to the Floor of the House to explain why this promise to the people of Wales has been broken, despite multiple promises having been made by him and the Welsh Secretary?

Andrea Leadsom: Our decisions on electrification reflect how advances in technology are enabling a different approach that is less disruptive to passengers and to communities. Specifically on the Cardiff-Swansea route, although we are not proceeding with electrification at the present time, we are working to build a better and bigger railway for Wales so that passengers in Wales will see the benefits of electrification sooner, when brand new and more spacious—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) is clearly not listening. Perhaps he does not want to hear the answer, but there is a clear answer: there will be benefits for passengers in Wales as a result of brand new and more spacious bi-mode, intercity express trains, which will begin to be introduced in October 2017. These state-of-the-art trains will make journeys faster along the whole route sooner, without the need for wires and gantries and the disruption involved in erecting them. So the advantages for passengers will be felt sooner, and that is as a result of changes in technology.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will agree that the safeguarding of democracy is vital at all levels. Will she therefore please make time for a debate about the dangerous antics of Taunton Deane Borough Council and its leader, John Williams? His council is trying to force a merger that has not been properly consulted on and certainly does not have universal approval. Frankly, this is municipal rubbish! May we please have time for a debate, because this sort of carry-on cannot be tolerated? We are proud of two levels of government and we are proud of the job they do. This is being run through roughshod, so Government time should be made available to discuss this important issue.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend again raises an important local constituency matter; he may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate to explore it further.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Further to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), may we have an early debate about rail transport? The rail system from Rochdale is grossly inadequate—the quality and quantity is not acceptable for a town such as Rochdale. We need an early debate so that the Secretary of State for Transport can explain the Government's strategy for not only Wales but the north of England.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Government have put billions into new road and rail projects, and we continue to do so. He and his Front-Bench colleagues may wish to choose an Opposition day opportunity to debate that matter, but I have tried to explain to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) that we are looking at what improvements technology can offer ahead of the disruption that the installation of electrification would undoubtedly cause for passengers.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend is aware of the problem with sleep-in shifts for careworkers and of the looming crisis for several of the companies involved because Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is demanding extremely large payments. There is no time for a debate or statement on this issue, so will she raise it with her colleagues in Government—in the Treasury and, indeed, in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—to ensure that this crisis is averted?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all the careworkers who do such a fantastic job looking after elderly and disabled people. He is right to raise this matter and it is certainly something the Department are looking at carefully.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): May we have a debate in Government time on UK relations with Turkey? The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has failed to meet the two-month deadline for responding to the Foreign Affairs Committee report published on 25 March, and the Select Committees are not likely to be able to deal with the matter for some time, so it is incredibly important that the Government explain whether they support the mass arrests, purges and arrests of Members of Parliament currently going on in Turkey. They must not hide behind the fact that we have not yet set up the Select Committees.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will no doubt wish to raise that issue at the next Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions. With the House rising today, he may also wish to raise it at the pre-recess summer Adjournment debate this afternoon. Other than that, he can of course write to the Department and seek their specific advice.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The staff of Parliament have quite rightly been thanked by many Members today, but I have heard a rumour that the police officers who serve us so well and are part of the parliamentary family may be moved after a five-year stint. Many right hon. and hon. Members value enormously the continuity of service that we get from the police constables, so will my right hon. Friend use her influence and make every effort to ensure that those who have served us for a long time are able to stay?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to mention the police and how well they look after us in this place. Our thanks and gratitude extend to them. On the other hand, he will appreciate fully that how the police operate on the Palace grounds is an operational

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matter. Although we are involved as an interested party, it is nevertheless for the police to decide how to manage their operations.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I have repeatedly sought clarity on rail electrification to Swansea. A succession of Transport Secretaries and Secretaries of State for Wales responded that I had only to look out of the train window to see that electrification was on its way. Today, sneaked out in a statement, came the news that my worst fears have been realised and rail electrification is not coming to Swansea. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Transport Secretary comes before the House to explain to my constituents and the people of Wales why he has misled them on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I say very gently to the hon. Lady that there is no such thing as sneaking out a statement. It is a statement; it is designed to inform the House. Statements come out before the House rises because all Secretaries of State and Ministers are conscious of the need to keep the House informed as far as possible while it is sitting.

On the hon. Lady's substantive point, as I have said to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) the point is that as technology changes there are ways to improve passenger services earlier for Welsh train users, so it is vital that we seize those opportunities to deliver improvements earlier in a more cost-effective way and with less disruption to passenger services.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Many of my constituents were delighted to see the Queen's Speech and the announcement of trade, agriculture and fisheries Bills, as were many constituents across the west country. However, the Question Times for the Departments for Transport, for Exiting the European Union and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have been some of the shortest in this Parliament. Given that she is the former Environment Secretary, will the Leader of the House consider extending the time allowed for those questions during this important time as we leave the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend shares my passion for the success of the agricultural and fishing sectors as we leave the EU. There are huge opportunities there and he is certainly a keen advocate for them. All the timings for oral questions are kept under review and they are adjusted as demand changes, so I can assure him that that will be considered in due course.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Leader of the House has already heard from my colleagues about the fury there is in south Wales and Rochdale—and also in the east midlands, in Nottingham—about the Government's renegeing on promises that were made about rail electrification. Clear promises were made: it was not just, "Oh, it might happen."

Communities were promised, rail communities were promised and MPs were promised and the Secretary of State should come to this House and explain to each and every one of us why he has gone back on that promise. I urge the Leader of the House to speak to the

Secretary of State for Transport and tell him that he needs to make a statement at the earliest opportunity. We have had investment denied us; it is not good enough. The Government have broken their promises and they should stop it.

Andrea Leadsom: I am slightly astonished that Opposition Members do not seem to appreciate that the decisions on electrification reflect how advances in technology are enabling a different approach that is less disruptive to passengers and communities. In particular, bi-mode train technology offers seamless transfer from diesel power to electric that is undetectable to passengers and means that we no longer need to electrify every line to achieve the same significant improvements to journeys. Opposition Members should welcome the fact that technological advances mean less disruption to passengers and that improvements can be delivered sooner in the same way as those offered by electrification.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I was disappointed that Monday's debate on abuse and intimidation during the recent general election did not happen as we ran out of time, not least because I wanted to raise the issue of graffiti on bridges and walls in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House update us on whether we will have another opportunity for a debate in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this matter. It was a very important debate and it was disappointing that the Opposition chose to squeeze it out earlier this week. The vile abuse that candidates suffered during the election is unacceptable and a threat to our democracy. We will look to reschedule the debate as soon as possible after the summer recess, possibly as early as September.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On rail electrification, it is clear that the Transport Secretary has broken the word of the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, who gave us an assurance that there would be electrification. Larger, heavier diesel trains will now run to Cardiff and switch on their diesel engines there, which is not environmentally friendly.

Will the Leader of the House admit to the House that the Public Accounts Committee has the solution to the problem? The project is £2 billion over budget and has been delayed by a year because the Department for Transport bought the trains before laying the track and did not anticipate that there were bridges in the way. The incompetence of the Transport Secretary has led to a slap in the face for the people of Swansea and Wales. Will the Leader of the House admit it and will she get her colleague to answer questions in this Chamber, rather than pushing out, under the cloak of darkness, stupid press releases that mislead people?

Andrea Leadsom: I do not for the life of me see why the hon. Gentleman thinks that earlier improvements for passengers with less disruption can possibly be a slap in the face. The Department for Transport is acknowledging that technology is enabling it to deliver less disruption and earlier improvements for passengers.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Growing public anger at the BBC is made worse by the fact that the public know that the BBC is funded by a highly

regressive television tax. May we have an early debate not just on the accountability of the BBC but on its funding, with a view to getting rid of the television tax, which at the moment results in 10% of all cases in the magistrates courts and particularly impacts on women? Some 70% of the victims of that tax are women.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that as a public service broadcaster funded by the licence fee the BBC has a responsibility to set an example for others and lead the way in promoting equality in the workplace. He might well wish to have a further debate on how the licence fee is working, and he will be aware that the recent debates on the BBC charter took up that very issue. If he wants to seek further discussion, he can do so in Westminster Hall or through an Adjournment debate.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My 18-year-old constituent is severely diabetic and has been battling for a much-needed personal independence payment for more than two years. He has won two appeals, but the Secretary of State is challenging the decision in court. My constituent wants to live an independent life and experience university, in common with his peers. May we have an urgent debate in Government time to address the effect of this Government’s unfair practices towards those with disabilities?

Andrea Leadsom: That sounds like a very sad case. All Members have cases that they take up on behalf of their constituents, and from this Dispatch Box I urge people with similar problems and challenges to talk to their MP, because we can often help in individual cases. I am sure that the hon. Lady is taking this up with the Department separately. As for the bigger picture around disability, the hon. Lady will be aware that Conservatives are absolutely committed to supporting disabled people, and spending on disability benefits will be higher in every year to 2020 than it was in 2010. We spend more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions, which is up more than £7 billion since 2010. I think we have a good track record, but I absolutely accept that there are always individual cases that we as representatives need to take up on behalf of our constituents.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Like all hon. Members, I care passionately about the future of my local hospital. The hospital trust in Telford has spent four years deliberating over plans to invest in the future of hospital services, but, regrettably, the trust has been paralysed by indecision, bureaucratic incompetence, and a complete failure to communicate with my constituents. The proposals have descended into disarray, with local MPs, councillors, and clinicians losing confidence in the management’s ability to deliver. Can we please have an urgent debate to consider this important issue?

Andrea Leadsom: I know that that matter has been of great concern to my hon. Friend, and I commend her for raising it. I believe that, recently, she met the senior responsible officers of NHS Future Fit to discuss progress and a revised timetable. I understand that the Future Fit programme board will meet on 31 July to hear the outcome of the independent review and the work relating to the women and children’s impact assessment. The Joint

Committee will then meet on 10 August to consider the recommendations made by the board and the next steps, including public consultation. She is absolutely right to keep raising this matter.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can we have a debate on nuclear disarmament? My constituent, Brian Quail, is currently being held at HMP Low Moss, and his colleague, Angie Zelter, in HMP Cornton Vale after they took part in a peaceful protest against the nuclear weapons store at Coulport. Does the Leader of the House recognise the moral outrage against weapons of mass destruction that drives campaigners to these lengths? Can this House be given the opportunity urgently to reconsider the immoral and unjustified renewal of Trident?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in this place, we absolutely do not interfere with matters of criminal justice. If someone is involved in breaking the law, it is very important that it is the police who decide what happens to them. On the substantive point about nuclear disarmament, I do not share his view. My personal view, and the view on the Government Benches, is that a nuclear deterrent is exactly that—a deterrent. It is an ultimate insurance that protects our people, and the security of the people is the first duty of any responsible Government.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House are aware of this behaviour, but, over the past year, I have had to dial 999 three times in my surgery to remove people. I have had death threats—a gentleman was convicted of harassment. Only a week ago, walking down a high street, someone swore at me. What really has annoyed me, though, is what happened last Friday. I had a surgery in which three people were being disruptive. I asked them to leave. One stood face to face with me, like a prize fighter, threatening to hit me, and he called me a monkey. That sort of behaviour is not acceptable. What would have happened if a Member of Parliament had done that to a constituent? I absolutely urge the Leader of the House—I know that Members on both sides suffer from this—to ensure that we have this debate on abuse. In the general election, I was assaulted when defending a female Conservative candidate. This sort of behaviour has to end.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this has gone beyond any reasonable level of disagreement. The intimidation, death threats, violence, abuse and disgusting acts, as well as the lower level anti-democratic pulling down of posters and putting graffiti on them and so on, were at unprecedented levels in the recent general election. As my hon. Friend knows, we scheduled a debate for Monday. Unfortunately, it could not take place because of an emergency debate on procedure that was called by the Opposition. It is fully our intention to reschedule that debate as soon as possible, because I know that many Members on the Government Benches, and some on the Opposition Benches, have suffered utterly unacceptable abuse. We need to have that discussion. The problem needs to be aired, and if people are involved in criminality, they need to be prosecuted.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Currently, it is taking a minimum of 48 weeks for people appealing Home Office decisions denying them asylum status to have their appeal heard. When they get a date, it is many months ahead. This is completely unacceptable. During that time, they cannot work or contribute to the UK economy, as many of them are capable of doing and wish to do. Can we have a debate in Government time, as soon as we return from recess, to discuss this serious issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. As all hon. Members know, we are often asked to take up cases on behalf of constituents, and it is right that we should do so, as we then have some success in improving the speed of the process. Since the end of 2014, we have consistently met our ambition of deciding 98% of straightforward cases within six months. If she is seeing some very bad examples, then of course she should raise them directly with the Home Office.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am sure that the Leader of the House is aware that there are Conservative MPs who believe that cutting corporation tax somehow increases tax take. Lines have been parroted to that effect all week, with some dodgy analysis provided to prove it. If it does increase tax take, why does the last Budget show that the measure to cut corporation tax to 19% will cost the Treasury £23.4 billion? Will she make a statement, outlining where the magic money tree Budget lines are that offset the £23 billion and show the massive increase in tax take?

Andrea Leadsom: We on the Government Benches have been absolutely focused on ensuring that we get our economy back on track and that we start again to live within our means. Let us be absolutely clear about this: when we came into office in 2010, we had the highest ever peacetime deficit of £150 billion a year more being spent than we take in tax revenues. Under this Government, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has massively improved its ability to take in tax revenues from avoidance measures, and from companies and individuals failing to pay. Significant billions of pounds of taxes have been gathered. What we have sought to do is to make the UK highly competitive so that companies come here to start businesses and people in this country start businesses. This has been a remarkable success story. Our deficit each year is now down by three quarters as a percentage of GDP. Not only that, but we have the highest employment figures ever and the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. Youth unemployment is down, and people are doing considerably better than they were in 2010. There is a lot more to do, but we are determined not to leave the next generation with the problems of this generation.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The Government have shaken the magic money tree bare to buy their majority. Is that not the reason why, at midnight on the last day of Parliament, they had to sneak out a statement on the cancellation of a long-established promise to the people of south Wales and then deny the House a proper debate on the subject? That is a disgraceful way to behave. When can we debate the other promises they made during the election, including the one to scrap the Severn Bridge's toll. Will they rat on that promise as well?

Andrea Leadsom: Let us be clear about this: it is the Conservatives who have always said that there is no magic money tree. Labour Members talk about a magic money tree, but it is their tuition fee promise that was going to shake the magic money tree to find £100 billion. That was a false promise, which they immediately retracted after the general election. On the Government Benches, we are looking at measures to make our economy a success. I have answered the question on the electrification of trains four—possibly five—times. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not hear me. We are trying to bring forward improvements earlier that cause less disruption so that passengers and communities can benefit sooner.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I am not going to make any progress with an inquiry into bimodal, back-to-the-future trains for south Wales, so I will ask for something else. May we have a public inquiry into the recent report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation on community rehabilitation companies, their inability to provide through-the-gate service outcomes for offenders, such as settled accommodation, the rise in reoffending, the rise in recalls to prison, the unrealistic workloads and the stressful working conditions? Is it not time we admitted that this experiment is an absolute disaster and looked at it again?

Andrea Leadsom: That is an incredibly important topic. Probation officers do a very difficult job, and they do very well in very trying circumstances. I understand that the hon. Lady intends to raise the matter with the Justice Committee so that it can consider it carefully once the Select Committees are up and running in September.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Only a week ago the Secretary of State for Transport told me that “electric trains will arrive in Cardiff and Swansea this autumn”—[Official Report, 13 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 410.], so I am not going to ask a question on that. The Government are renegeing not only on their commitment to reducing pollution from diesel engines, but on their commitment to reducing carbon emissions, by delaying a decision on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. This false promise shows that they have no interest in Wales. May we therefore have an urgent statement when the House returns after the recess on the Government's plan to secure the Swansea bay tidal lagoon?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place and look forward to working with her in the Chamber. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon, as she will know, is an enormous, incredibly ambitious and very expensive project. When I was an Energy Minister it had already been discussed for many years. There are challenges, from the perspective of value for bill payers' or taxpayers' money. Charles Hendry carried out a review, and the Government's response will be brought forward as soon as possible.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Many individuals who convert to another religion or renounce faith altogether face being ostracised by sections of their community and even by family members, making them more vulnerable to hate crime. May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on what is being done to tackle crimes motivated by anti-apostasy?

Andrea Leadsom: I think that all Members across the House would respect the right of any individual to choose to worship as they wish, so I think the hon. Gentleman would have a lot of support if he applied for a Westminster Hall debate and there would be a lot of interest.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): As the House rises for the summer recess, many of my constituents are today mopping up properties that have once again been flooded, 18 months after Storm Desmond hit Lancashire. During that time the Government applied for EU emergency funding to support communities and flood resilience, but my local authorities, Lancashire County Council and Lancaster City Council, have been prevented from bidding for that money. May we have a debate in Government time on how we can improve flood resilience and flood defences in communities affected by flooding?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. When I was Environment Secretary I visited Lancashire and other parts of the country that had been flooded. It is absolutely devastating, and we have seen yet more examples in recent days. She will be aware that we have a six-year commitment of £2.5 billion in flood defence projects to better protect an additional 300,000 properties by 2021. There are a number of projects and a number of sources of funding for them. I am sure that she will want to raise the specific case in her constituency at the next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Question Time.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I point out to the Leader of the House that bimodal trains are not some modern technology; they were first patented in 1989. I am sure that she will know that Crossrail is costing £202 million per mile to complete and that High Speed 2 is now estimated to cost £403 million per mile. By contrast, rail electrification between Selby

and Hull would cost only £3.2 million per mile. May we please have a debate on why Conservative Ministers blocked the Hull scheme, even though it was privately backed with funding, lower in cost and much better value?

Andrea Leadsom: The level of interest in this topic from the Opposition Benches suggests that it might be a good candidate for an Opposition day debate. I have answered this question six times now. The Department for Transport is spending billions on road and rail infrastructure, and delivering early wherever possible, and with the least disruption to communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience today goes to Dr David Drew.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I wish you a happy recess.

On the subject of abuse, will the Leader of the House take up the situation in Gloucestershire County Council, where a couple of weeks ago the Conservative Councillor Lynden Stowe referred on his Facebook page to the Leader of the Opposition as being comparable to Hitler and likened the Labour party's campaign to attract younger voters to national socialism and other allied movements. Mr Stowe, who is also a cabinet member, has removed the comments but refuses to refute them. Given that abuse is a big topic on the Conservative Benches, would she like to have a word with the high command in Gloucestershire and get rid of him?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific case that I obviously know nothing about. Let me say again that abuse and intimidation is completely unacceptable, from whoever it comes and to whomever it is directed. Certainly, many colleagues on the Conservative side of the House have been subjected to vile abuse, and it is something that the House definitely needs to consider. We all need to work together to put a stop to it.

Grenfell Tower

12.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Grenfell Tower and fire safety.

Five weeks have now passed since the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. Nothing that has happened in those five weeks will have diminished the grief of those who lost loved ones. Nothing will have negated the trauma of those who lost their homes. But across the public sector, in local and central Government, in the emergency services, in hospitals, in schools and more, dedicated public servants have been doing all they can to deal with the aftermath and help the community recover.

Over the past five weeks the Government have endeavoured to keep the House up to date with these developments. This is the third oral statement that I have made on the subject. The House has also heard from the Prime Minister and the Housing Minister, who also answered questions in Westminster Hall before Parliament formally returned. There has been a full debate in the Commons, four written statements and a number of letters that have been sent to all Members. My aim today is to provide an update before the House rises, and another opportunity for hon. Members to ask questions. I would also like to let the House know exactly what action we will be taking over the summer.

¹The police continue to list 80 people as either dead or missing and presumed dead. Thirty-nine victims have so far been formally identified, with 39 inquests opened by the coroner and adjourned pending the public inquiry and the police investigation. Two adults remain in hospital. I know that some local residents remain concerned that the number of people in the tower that night has been underestimated. I continue to urge anyone with further information to come forward. We have been very clear that we do not mind if those affected were subletting or have immigration issues; all we care about is getting to the truth.

Turning to the re-homing programme, everyone who lost their home in Grenfell Tower and Grenfell Walk has been made at least one offer of good-quality, fully furnished temporary accommodation in the local area. As of 10 o'clock this morning, 35 of these have been accepted and 10 families have moved in. Those numbers are slightly down on the figures published recently, as some people have changed their minds, as they are perfectly entitled to do. Where residents have turned down an offer, we are finding them suitable alternatives. Where residents are not yet ready to engage in the process, because they do not want to make a decision right now or they would rather wait for a permanent home to be offered, we will of course respect that.

At Communities and Local Government questions this week, the quality of the accommodation being offered was raised. I repeat the Housing Minister's offer to those on the Opposition Front Bench to visit some of these homes so that they can inspect them for themselves. I do not believe that they have taken us up on that offer so far, but it still stands.

In the long term, we are continuing to seek out and secure suitable permanent accommodation. The first such homes for Grenfell families will be ready within days, and specialist teams are ready to start matching them to families and to start making the offers.

At the town hall, we are continuing preparations to return control of the recovery effort from Gold Command to Kensington and Chelsea Council. I have spoken at length with the new leader of the council and been very clear that Gold Command will not hand over the reins until it is clear that the council is ready and able to cope. We saw last night the raw anger that some in the community still feel towards the council. That is entirely understandable; as the Prime Minister herself has said, the initial response from the local authority was simply not good enough.

There is not a lot of trust there, and not a lot of confidence, and that is why, when Kensington and Chelsea Council takes over the recovery operation, it will do so under the supervision of the independent Grenfell recovery taskforce. It is important to stress that the role of the taskforce is not to investigate the causes of the fire or to apportion blame—that is for the public inquiry and the police investigation. Rather, the taskforce is there to provide advice and support and to see to it that the council does the job that is required of it. We are in the process of finalising the taskforce membership, and I hope to make an announcement soon. I can confirm that the handover from Gold Command to Kensington and Chelsea will not happen until the taskforce is up and running.

Away from Kensington, the fire safety testing programme continues. We now believe that no more than 208 local authority and housing association residential blocks over 18 metres tall have been fitted with aluminium composite material cladding. Some 189 of these have had cladding samples tested by the Building Research Establishment, have been tested by proxy or have already had their cladding taken down. None of them has passed the limited combustibility test. Samples from a further 12 towers have been submitted this week, and they are now being tested. The BRE has yet to see samples from seven towers, all of them managed by housing associations. A month after the tests began, that is simply unacceptable, and I expect to see all those housing associations submit samples without any further delay.

On the advice of the independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, the BRE is now undertaking system testing, which will help establish how combinations of different types of ACM panels with different types of insulation behave in a fire. An explanatory note setting out the process and the timetable for further advice will be published shortly. It has taken a short time to design and set up the test, but we expect the first results to be available next week. As soon as results are available, we will share them first with the local authorities and housing associations that have confirmed that their properties are clad in the same combination of materials that were used in the test. We will also, of course, inform the local fire and rescue service. The results will provide further information that building owners and their professional advisers can use to take decisions about what, if any, remedial action is required.

Although legal responsibility for fire safety enforcement lies with local authorities, I do have the power to direct an authority to consider these test results as part of its duty to keep housing conditions under review. If necessary, I will not hesitate to use this power, which could lead to enforcement action being taken against a landlord if a fire risk is not dealt with. I do hope it will not come to that.

Moving on to the public inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick is continuing his preparatory work. I welcome his decision to extend by two weeks the consultation period for the terms of reference. While we are all anxious for the inquiry to get under way, it is important that the remit is appropriate, and that everyone affected has had an opportunity to share their views.

With the House due to rise later today, this is the last statement I will be making before the summer recess, but work on the recovery effort and the testing regime will obviously continue at pace while Parliament is not sitting. My Department will be writing regular letters to all Members to keep them abreast of progress.

Finally, I pay tribute to the many Members on both sides of the House who have assisted with the emergency response and the recovery effort so far. They have provided insight, support, scrutiny and a voice for their constituents, both in public and behind the scenes. The weeks, months and even years ahead will be unimaginably difficult for those who were caught up in the fire and those who have lost family and friends. There is nothing that any of us can do to bring back those who died or to erase the trauma of that terrible night, but I am sure the whole House shares my determination to take care of those who have been affected by the fire, to make sure that the truth comes out and that justice is done, and to see to it that a tragedy like this never, ever happens again.

12.45 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement.

This is the fourth time in less than four weeks that we have had to encourage the Secretary of State or his Ministers to make a statement on Government action following the Grenfell Tower fire. He praises the scrutiny provided by Members on both sides of the House, but how will he keep Members informed over the next six recess weeks? More importantly, how can we get answers to the continuing, serious concerns we have from our constituents and from the Grenfell Tower families and survivors? Round-robin letters are simply not sufficient.

The Secretary of State calls today's statement an update on progress, but in truth there has been next to no progress. After this truly dreadful fire, the Secretary of State had two urgent, overriding responsibilities: first, to ensure that everyone affected from Grenfell Tower had the help and rehousing they needed; and secondly, to reassure all the people living in tower blocks around the country that their homes were safe or that the work necessary to make them safe was being done. More than five weeks after this fire, he is failing on both fronts.

We have learned today that 169 families lost their homes in Grenfell Tower, but that only 10 have moved out of emergency hotels and hostels, while 25 more have been offered a temporary home they feel they can accept. I accept that the reasons may be complex, but I am still getting reports of residents being told they will be made intentionally homeless if they refuse an offer, despite the Government's word that this will not happen; residents being offered accommodation with damp, leaks and a lack of full furnishing; residents being shown somewhere with too few bedrooms for their children; and residents being made an offer, but then being told that the details will follow only afterwards.

As for the Government's fire safety testing programme, the more we are told, the worse it gets. The Secretary of State's statement raises more questions than it answers. The Prime Minister said:

"We can test over 100 buildings a day".

So why have only 259 tests been done? Why can councils and housing associations not get non-ACM cladding, or insulation, tested? Why is the Secretary of State ignoring the views of fire safety experts, landlords and residents, ignoring the potential fire risk in thousands of other tower blocks, and only narrowly testing ACM cladding? How many of the 259 blocks that have failed have had their cladding removed? Where blocks have failed the first, samples test but passed the second, systems test, is the cladding still safe to leave in place?

Have the Government agreed any financial support for any council or housing association to help with the costs? Has the Secretary of State persuaded the Treasury to agree access to the Government's Contingencies Fund, or will any costs have to come from within the Department's existing budgets?

We know from the report on the Lakanal House fire—I suspect we will see the same with Grenfell Tower—that the problem was not just cladding. The Government's testing programme is simply too slow, too narrow and too confused. It is simply not fit for purpose. Ministers must therefore act. They must widen the testing programme to reassure all high-rise residents that their homes are safe; fund the necessary work on cladding and on fire safety to make them safe; review the system of approved inspectors for building control checks, starting with all the cases where the cladding has failed but had been signed off previously; and start the overhaul of building regulations, which the coroner reporting on the Lakanal House fire recommended to Ministers four years ago, and which can later incorporate any findings from the fire investigations or the public inquiry into Grenfell Tower.

The Secretary of State talked about the pace of what is being done. In truth, Ministers have been three steps off the pace in responding to the tragedy of Grenfell Tower at each stage. I fear that without the scrutiny of Members on both sides of the House that he praised, the Government's pace will slacken over the recess weeks at the very time when it is clear that he needs to do a great deal more to deal effectively with the complex problems and consequences of the Grenfell fire tragedy.

Sajid Javid: So far, the right hon. Gentleman has taken a fairly constructive approach to this very, very important issue. I would urge him very much to maintain that in the weeks and months that lie ahead, and not to adopt the approach of his right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, who has shown just how out of touch he is on this issue. That is not what the public want to see.

The right hon. Gentleman asked how I can make sure during the recess period that all hon. Members in all parts of the House are kept in touch or informed and are able to ask questions. Obviously he knows that because Parliament will be in recess, some of the usual channels will not be there. However, I am determined to ensure that we make use of what is available, whether through regular communications with all Members of Parliament or through my Department's own operations in issuing press releases and explanatory notes. In addition, my colleagues and I will be available during the summer

[*Sajid Javid*]

recess to meet or talk to any hon. Member who has any questions. I have already planned to meet the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) next week. I will be happy to talk to the right hon. Gentleman at any time, or to meet to discuss with him any of the issues pertaining to Grenfell Tower and this terrible tragedy.

On housing, the right hon. Gentleman will know that huge efforts have been made by Gold Command, by my Department and by Kensington and Chelsea Council to make sure that the needs of all the residents are met and that their wishes are respected in terms of temporary accommodation and permanent accommodation, whether they were social tenants or leaseholders. Very shortly, within just a matter of days, Kensington and Chelsea Council, with the support of the Government, will issue a fresh document to every resident that will make it very clear how this process can work going forward, answer a lot of the questions that residents will naturally have, and make sure that all the information is in one place. A lot of that work has been put together after consultation with many of the residents to try to make sure that all the questions they would naturally have are answered, including some of the key questions around the allocation policy of some of the permanent housing that has been identified.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the testing process. This is a very comprehensive, detailed and, by its very nature, complex process. At every stage, we have been led by advice from the independent expert panel. These are the people we should all rely on to give the best advice on how testing should be prioritised. The clear advice, right at the start, was to prioritise testing of cladding that may be similar to that which was on Grenfell Tower. I think it was right to prioritise that. That does not, of course, preclude tests on other types of cladding. The BRE facilities are not the only test facilities available in the country. Landlords, whether they are local authorities, housing associations or private landlords, have a legal responsibility to make sure that their buildings are safe. That is why, on the back of the advice and explanatory notes that we have issued, landlords—I know of this happening in many cases—are already taking further action to make sure that even if their buildings do not have ACM cladding, they have still done everything they can to re-check that they are safe. With regard to the systems tests, I mentioned that we will be publishing an explanatory note that will go into much more detail about exactly how those tests will work, and how their results will then be used.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about funding. I have made it clear from the Dispatch Box a number of times that if any local authority or housing association has to take any action to make sure that its buildings are safe, we expect them to do that immediately. If they cannot afford it, they should approach us, and we will discuss how to make sure that they have the support that they need. To date, as far as I am aware, not a single local authority or housing association has approached me or my Department to ask for any assistance. If they did, of course we would take that very seriously. If he is aware of any local authority that has a funding issue, then he should encourage it to contact me.

On the building regulations, the right hon. Gentleman again rightly said that we need to learn the lessons from this terrible tragedy—whether they come from the public inquiry, the police inquiry, or the fire inspection work that has happened—and make sure that where changes are required in the building regulations or the enforcement of those regulations, they are made as swiftly as possible. There will be further news on that in due course.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his interest. I repeat that he can approach me at any time during the summer recess period.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and congratulate him on keeping the House up to date with progress thus far.

My right hon. Friend is right in saying that there is a lack of confidence in the local authority in Kensington and Chelsea. The taskforce that he is going to nominate, hopefully later today or tomorrow, is vital to restore confidence. Will he update the House on the exact powers that the taskforce has? Clearly, if control is passed back to Kensington and Chelsea Council, that raises the question of who can direct the council to do things, and what happens if there is a dispute over what is done. For example, the shadow Secretary of State mentioned individuals almost being blackmailed into accepting a property that they do not want. Does the taskforce have the power to direct the local authority to take certain actions, and will my right hon. Friend personally intervene if it needs extra help?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the importance of the taskforce and the work that is required of Kensington and Chelsea going forward. As I said, there is a very low level of confidence among the residents—perfectly understandably so. We saw that last night at the local council meeting. The taskforce will comprise experienced people independent of the council to provide the council with strategic advice, particularly on rehousing and community engagement, and it will report independently to me. I have made it very clear from the start that, if it believes that the council is not up to the job, I will not hesitate to take further action.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I have confirmed in response to previous statements that the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities have in hand the safety of Scotland's high-rise flats, and that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is undertaking fire safety and incident planning visits to all high-rises in Scotland.

I am sure that many hon. Members will, like me, have received intimations of concern from constituents about a number of aspects of this terrible disaster. One question that I hear over and again is, "Where was the infrastructure in the borough to deal with such a disaster, and where was the plan for dealing with its aftermath?" Constituents and members of the public ask me what was going on in such a wealthy borough that it did not seem able to cope with such a disaster on its doorstep. Was this just a failing of one out-of-touch Tory council, or is it an endemic problem? What steps are the UK Government taking to ensure that such an inept and incompetent response to such a terrible disaster could not happen again in what is really a very wealthy area?

Another concern to all our constituents, I am sure, is the BBC report earlier this week saying that less than £800,000 of the £20 million donated has been disbursed in the past five weeks. That is leading to growing scepticism among residents, with the chair of the residents group saying recently that she feels that the public's generosity "is being betrayed". Can the Secretary of State assure us that there will be full transparency with regard to how the funds donated by the public and business are being put to use, and that any administrative and bureaucratic obstacles that are preventing that money from being distributed promptly are removed, so far as is reasonably possible?

Sajid Javid: The Scottish Government and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service have done a commendable job in responding to this tragedy and in ensuring that the lessons are learned in Scotland, too.

On the hon. and learned Lady's wider questions, it is fair to say that, with a tragedy on this scale, of this size and proportion, almost any local authority in the country would be overwhelmed. Despite that, however, there are certainly things that any reasonable person would have expected of Kensington and Chelsea Council. As I said earlier, there were failings, and that is why there is a need for an intervention of the type I have described. There are longer-term lessons to learn not just for boroughs in London, but more widely to ensure that, as a country, we are better prepared for civil emergencies of this type. That work, led by the Cabinet Office, has already begun.

The hon. and learned Lady talked about charity funding. It is great that so many people have contributed to help the people hurt by this tragedy. The Charity Commission has been working with a number of charities to ensure that there is a co-ordinated response. All of them are working together to get the maximum benefit from the donations that have been made, and I think that is right. We were asked to make it clear that any donations through the co-ordinated response of charities—funds raised by the *Evening Standard*, the Rugby Portobello Trust and others—would not have an impact on benefits. We have done what was asked of us. We were asked to disregard donations from the point of view of benefits, and we have done exactly that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The residents of Grenfell Tower have of course been very badly affected by this terrible tragedy, and they need help in a number of areas, such as financial help—immediate financial assistance—as well as rehousing and emotional support. Would it help if individual caseworkers were deployed—or has the Secretary of State already deployed some—to provide one-to-one support through this process to ensure that residents get the assistance they need?

Sajid Javid: Yes. Right at the start, Gold Command very quickly brought in key workers for every family affected, whether they were in Grenfell Tower, Grenfell Walk or other nearby housing. One part of the transition process—this has already begun—will be making sure that Kensington and Chelsea Council puts in place permanent key workers for each family for as long as the families require that support. That is essential, and it has been supported by the Government.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): This morning, I met a number of local government leaders, who said they were completely in the dark about the circumstances in which central Government would help them to pay for essential work on tower blocks. The Secretary of State has said that local authorities should go ahead and that, if they cannot afford to pay for such work, the Government will help in those circumstances. The Secretary of State knows that the funding comes out of housing revenue account. Rents are capped and borrowing is capped, so for many authorities the only way in which they will be able to pay for extra work on tower blocks is by stopping important work on other properties. Does he accept that, in those circumstances where work on tower blocks would mean not doing important work elsewhere, central Government will pay to help local authorities to do the necessary work?

Sajid Javid: Of course we want other essential work, such as on maintaining social housing, to continue. The clear starting point, however, is that it is the legal responsibility of local authorities and housing associations to ensure that their properties are safe. They should already be doing that work. Where they have found that that is not the case and they need to take action, they should take such action. As I have said, if they need help because they cannot afford it, they should approach us. So far, however, I am not aware of a single local authority that has done so.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his detailed statement, and for having kept the House so fully apprised of recent developments. I am horrified to hear that some housing associations have not yet, despite requests to do so, sent in samples for testing. Is the Secretary of State considering taking any further action? Perhaps the time has come for naming and shaming, for example.

Sajid Javid: If such action is required, I will not hesitate to take it. In the past few days, since we have been a lot more public about pushing those that have not come forward with the relevant information, I must say that information has flowed in very quickly, especially during the past 48 hours. I believe we are still waiting for information on seven buildings managed by housing associations. I understand that all those properties are privately owned but managed by housing associations, so I recognise that they may be different from and more complex than others, but we still expect the information to come in right away.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State for coming to the Chamber again, and indeed the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), for being very accessible to colleagues on this issue. However, they still seem to be in denial about the review of approved document B, the fire guidance for building regulations. Ministers have been promising a review since 2011, and the Lakanal House coroner recommended it in 2013. As recently as 2015, the then housing Minister said that work would start in 2016 and that it would be published in 2017. One can only assume that either the independent panel of experts is telling them not to do it because it is not necessary, or the Government believe

[Jim Fitzpatrick]

that the public inquiry will conclude that we do not need to do it. Which is it? The work will take time, and the Government could get ahead of the curve by starting the work now, so that when the public inquiry recommends doing so—many of us expect the inquiry to recommend it—they can say, “Here’s the work.”

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As usual, he has raised a very important point. The purpose of the independent expert panel is to provide any advice that might require emergency action. If it does so in terms of building regulations or enforcement, we will certainly do that. As I said in response to the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), I accept that there are clear issues around building regulations and enforcement and that, to make perhaps longer-term changes, we should act more swiftly and not necessarily wait for the outcome of a public inquiry, because with an independent inquiry the Government do not control the timing of that. I am looking at what further steps we can take to ensure we learn the lessons very quickly.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): This terrible fire has affected not just the people who were unfortunate enough to live in the block itself, but the residents living around Grenfell Tower. They must have been horribly affected by seeing the fire and by its aftermath. What support is being given to local residents to help them to live with this tragedy?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. The immediate support was to provide emergency accommodation in hotel rooms for all families who required it, and that has been done. Many of them are still in hotel rooms; that is what they decided to do. The council has designed an offer for people in many of the nearby blocks. Specific offers have been made to families in three of them—Barandon Walk, Hurstway Walk and Testerton Walk—to allow them to return to their homes and to provide them with the support they need.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Government intervened in housing providers’ budgets by imposing a rent cut that reduced their income. Because of that and other factors, we already know that repairs and maintenance budgets have fallen by almost a fifth since 2010. If tenants and residents are not to fear that fire safety will be compromised by budgets or that repair and maintenance budgets will not be compromised by fire safety, will the Secretary of State assure us that all housing providers will know that they do not have to squeeze further other essential repairs and maintenance work in order to install sprinklers and carry out other remedial fire safety work?

Sajid Javid: I have been clear that it is clearly the legal responsibility of all local authorities and housing associations to ensure that their residents are safe and that they are meeting all safety regulations, including fire safety regulations. If there are instances where they cannot afford such work, they should approach us.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his detailed statement. This fire is a terrible tragedy that will have a huge impact on many aspects of future Government policy. I have always been a passionate believer in the important role of urban regeneration in a holistic housing policy. Will he confirm that, for schemes that are brought forward in future and in our wider housing policy, we have to learn all the lessons of what happened at Grenfell Tower and ensure that we have the most robust possible fire measures in place?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are many lessons to learn from this terrible tragedy. We have talked already about a number of them in the House, and one certainly concerns our wider and longer-term approach to social housing.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s willingness to keep us all updated over the next few weeks. Does he agree that local authorities and housing associations have a real duty to keep the residents and tenants in those blocks updated? Some local authorities are better than others, and there is huge concern about times when testing has not been reported back or results have not been received. It is absolutely crucial that local authorities report back over the summer.

Has the Secretary of State agreed that the Fire Brigades Union should be a main participant in the inquiry, to which it can bring all its expertise, knowledge and willingness to help to get to the bottom of this terrible tragedy?

Sajid Javid: The decision on the FBU’s role in the public inquiry will be for the judge. With the extension in the terms of reference, he is keen to ensure that he speaks to all interested parties, but the decision will ultimately be his to make. I agree 100% with the hon. Lady that all local authorities and housing associations must do everything they can to keep their residents informed. Many residents will, naturally, be worried and have concerns. I have seen good examples of local authorities and housing authorities keeping their residents up to date, but, as she says, there are some not-so-good examples. If she or any other hon. Member is aware of councils or housing associations that are not doing a good job, please make me aware of that.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s clear, informative statement, but I wonder whether he might give us a little more indication of what progress has been made in the provision of temporary accommodation for those who have lost their homes in this tragedy. It does seem as though some are still facing difficulties. Could he give me an assurance that all efforts are being made, especially when it comes to replacing homes on a like-for-like basis?

Sajid Javid: The initial response was to provide emergency accommodation and to ensure that people were offered temporary accommodation within three weeks, and that certainly happened. More than 200 units of temporary accommodation, all of which were of high quality and fully furnished, were identified in the local area. As I have mentioned, some families have taken up the offer. Others wish to move straight to permanent accommodation, and others say that they are not ready. We will respect

their wishes. This is one of the biggest jobs for Kensington and Chelsea and for the Government, who are working together to ensure that all the families affected have accommodation available that is of high quality and, importantly, on the same terms as that which they had before. That is certainly what we are pursuing.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Electrical safety is of paramount importance in rented accommodation, particularly when it is high rise, and it appears as though the Grenfell Tower incident was caused by a fire in a fridge freezer. Will the Secretary of State commit to introducing mandatory electrical safety checks in rented properties, bearing in mind the fact that the Department for Communities and Local Government working group that was looking at the matter has concluded?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is looking at product electrical safety, including product recall, and I will ensure that he knows about the right hon. Gentleman's concerns.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I get the impression from previous answers that I have received from my right hon. Friend that local authorities have been very good at meeting the different requests that Government have made of them, but can any specific pressure be applied to non-compliant housing associations? We simply cannot take any chances with safety.

Sajid Javid: Local authorities have generally been good in their response. Of the buildings mentioned earlier that have had their cladding tested or proxy tested, 46 are local authority buildings. Some local authorities have been very helpful in working with housing associations, but where that can help, we will certainly look at it further.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The West Midlands Fire Service has recommended that extensive work be carried out on 213 tower blocks in Birmingham containing 10,000 households. That work must be done as a matter of priority, but it will be very challenging indeed for the city, given the pressure on its budget. May I ask the Secretary of State, therefore—having spoken with the leader of the council, John Clancy, this morning—whether he is prepared to receive an all-party delegation from the city, consisting of Birmingham's Members of Parliament and the leadership of Birmingham City Council, so that we can say to tenants in Birmingham, "Everything necessary will be done to ensure you are safe"?

Sajid Javid: Whether in Birmingham or in any other part of the country, we expect local authorities and housing associations to do any necessary work. If their local fire and rescue service says that such work is necessary, of course they should pursue it. I know the leader of Birmingham City Council well already, and if he wants to approach me, he should do so.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving us an update. I also thank the Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who has responsibility

for housing, for his assiduous attention in the aftermath of the tragedy. People in Chaucer House, one of the two council-owned tower blocks in Sutton, have rightly been asking questions after the failure of the sample that was tested. In particular, they were not quite sure what the grading of 1, 2 or 3 meant. Residents in Balaam House nearby will also be asking questions when their results come back. Can the Secretary of State give me further details about the systems testing procedure that the Government have introduced?

Sajid Javid: It is perfectly reasonable to ask such questions. Because the tests are being done on the back of expert advice, some of them are naturally complex and require proper explanation. That is why we have already issued an explanatory note on the tests of the core material of the ACM cladding, and it is why I have also decided to issue an explanatory note on the new systems test, which will be available very shortly.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): In Plymouth there are three tower blocks with combustible cladding. Plymouth Community Homes has acted quickly in fire testing and installing additional safety upgrades, but it needs additional information from the Government about the technical specifications of new cladding, if it is to be installed. Plymouth Community Homes and Conservative-run Plymouth City Council have written to the Government asking for financial assistance to enable them to do that. When will the Government be able to give them clarity about the technical specifications of new cladding and assistance with funding?

Sajid Javid: Two weeks ago, we issued clear guidance on what the limited combustibility test results mean and what action should be taken. As I said a moment ago, an explanatory note on the next set of tests—the so-called system tests—will be coming out shortly, and it will no doubt help Plymouth to make decisions. On funding, Plymouth should absolutely be getting on with any necessary work. If it has an affordability issue, it should approach us.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that the safety of tenants in the private rented sector will also be taken into account in the independent expert advisory panel and in the Government's future actions? Tenants living in private rented homes also deserve to feel safe.

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. The testing facilities have been made available for free to the private sector, and a number of landlords have used those facilities. The housing Minister, other Ministers and I have met many representatives from the private sector to ensure that they are fully informed and that they receive all our guidance.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend advise us what engagement his Department has had with the many charities looking to support survivors of the Grenfell tragedy?

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned earlier, a number of charities have set up dedicated funding efforts to provide help and support to the victims of this tragedy.

[*Sajid Javid*]

The Department has been working across Government; for example, we are working with the Charity Commission to help to co-ordinate the use of those funds as they are distributed, and with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that they are disregarded for benefits purposes. Over the next weeks and months, we will continue to do what we can to help those charities to help the victims.

Points of Order

1.19 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Monday night we had the farce of the Secretary of State for Transport being dragged to the Chamber to face questions about HS2. Today, the last day of the Session, a written statement has been sneaked out which is of massive economic detriment to the country. It lays waste to any semblance of industrial strategy; it totally conflicts with what was said about electrification at the Dispatch Box on Monday night; and it smashes to bits the Government's promises to the people of the north and the midlands and especially to the people of south Wales. For the Secretary of State to drop this bombshell on the British people without affording Members the opportunity to hold him to account by way of an oral statement before we break for the summer is completely disrespectful to this House. I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to how the Secretary of State can be held to account for his gross omission and explain this disastrous U-turn.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Once again the Secretary of State has made a major announcement outside the Chamber on an issue that affects my constituents in Sheffield. The electrification of the midland mainline has been on and off for a number of years; it was on and then paused, then it was on and now apparently it is off again. A written statement has been sneaked out, but no statement has been made in the House. The Secretary of State's predecessor always came to this House to make such statements. Can you require the Secretary of State to come to this House to explain what is going on with this electrification, which once again has been put on hold?

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can we have a statement on the impact of this decision on the proposed electrification of the south Wales valley lines? The statement that has been sneaked out today is appalling.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Hon. Members know that the matter of when a Minister comes to the House is not for me, Mr Speaker or any other occupant of the Chair. The matters that were just raised in three points of order were raised many times during today's business questions and answered by the Leader of the House, who is once again in her place. I am sure that she will have conveyed the feelings of the House to the Secretary of State. The hon. Gentlemen know very well the methods by which Members can try to insist on a Secretary of State coming to the House, and I am sure that they will pursue the matter in that way. I can do nothing further from the Chair, but I am certain that the Secretary of State for Transport knows the opinion of hon. Members.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government are required by the High Court to publish an air quality strategy next week because they are in breach of European Union air quality standards, which has led to 40,000 premature deaths and costs £20 billion a year. Yesterday

some 60 MPs wrote to me in support of a clean air Bill asking the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to incorporate those provisions in such a strategy. When will we have a chance to debate those matters, and why has a statement not been made today on the issue, given that the House will not have an opportunity to debate it before the deadline imposed by the Court? We knew this would happen and it has such deadly consequences for British people.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, the hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot require someone to come to the House on the back of a point of order. Of course, if the hon. Gentleman wished to ask a question about the timetabling of business matters, he should have asked the Leader of the House when she was at the Dispatch Box earlier.

Geraint Davies: I asked her about another matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I know that and have every sympathy for the hon. Gentleman. He has drawn his concerns to the attention of the Leader of the House, who is in her place. It is not a matter for me.

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

1.24 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That Kathryn Stone be appointed Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on the terms of the Report of the House of Commons Commission, HC 294, dated 19 July 2017.

The motion is in my name, as spokesperson for the House of Commons Commission, and those of other commissioners and of the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), the recently re-elected Chair of the Committee on Standards.

In 2003 the House decided that the office of Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards should be held for a non-renewable term of five years. As the House will be aware, the commissioner's principal responsibilities include maintaining the Register of Members' Financial Interests and other registers; monitoring the operation of the code of conduct and proposing possible modifications to the Committee on Standards; and receiving and investigating matters relating to the conduct of Members and reporting findings to the Committee where appropriate. The appointment of the current commissioner, Kathryn Hudson, comes to an end on 31 December and the House therefore needs to appoint a new commissioner.

I should begin by expressing the appreciation of the House of Commons Commission for the work Kathryn Hudson has done during her tenure as the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. During that time she has handled a wide range of complaints against Members and has also contributed to the development of the standards system as a whole, including through instituting greater opportunities for training Members and their staff, and working on the respect policy and review of the code of conduct and guide to the rules.

Kathryn Hudson took up her post at the same time as the first lay members arrived on the Committee on Standards, and she has played a full part in ensuring the success of those new arrangements in addressing standards issues in the House. Throughout her time in office she has demonstrated great integrity, resilience, patience and persistence, and she will be remembered for her real dedication to public service. I am sure that the House would wish to join me in thanking Ms Hudson for her work.

The recruitment process for her replacement was rigorous. Advertisements were placed on the websites of *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*, and a range of other web-based methods were used to attract applications. In total, 81 applications were received. The process included the right hon. Member for Rother Valley, Dr Jane Martin, who was an external member of the recruitment panel and is a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and members of the Commission. Full details of the recruitment process are available in the Commission's report.

Kathryn Stone is currently the chief legal ombudsman of England and Wales, a post she has held since January 2016. Prior to that, Ms Stone held posts as an independent police complaints commissioner and as the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors for Northern

[*Tom Brake*]

Ireland. The Commission is confident that Ms Stone has the necessary experience and skills for the role, and that she will bring to it the authority, independence, discretion and strength of character required.

Ms Stone's appointment will commence at the beginning of 2018, if the House approves the nomination. I am confident that Ms Stone will fulfil her responsibilities to the same high standard as her predecessors, and I commend this nomination to the House.

1.28 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Let me begin by putting on the record the gratitude of the House for the work undertaken by Kathryn Hudson since her appointment in 2013. She has played an important role in the work of the House. New Members will be able to testify to her valuable advice on their conduct and responsibilities. She has investigated and reported on complaints with all the diligence that we and the public would expect of her. She has also, of course, ensured transparency through the operation of the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the other registers.

I would also like to make it clear that we owe a debt of gratitude to the staff of the House who support the commissioner in delivering standards, and to the Chairman of the Standards Committee for his work.

Although I have not personally been involved in the recruitment process, I am encouraged by the remarks of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). We are all grateful to the selection board for sifting the candidates. Kathryn Stone will no doubt serve the House with the same diligence as all her predecessors. On that basis, I hope that the House will endorse the motion.

1.29 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I welcome the comments of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and the Leader of the House. On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, I echo the thanks to the outgoing Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Kathryn Hudson. From my personal experience of meeting Kathryn when I was a new Member, I know just how important the role is in supporting all hon. Members. I thank her for her work.

I also thank all those who sat on the interview panel for following a robust process and selecting a successor, Kathryn Stone. Her Majesty's Opposition welcome and endorse the appointment of Kathryn Stone and wish her well in her new role.

1.30 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): As a member of the Commission and, for some time, a member of the Committee on Standards, I support the motion. I endorse the positive comments about Kathryn Hudson, who worked extremely hard. She arrived at a difficult time, when the Standards Committee first had lay members; there was a steep learning curve for the lay people and for Kathryn Hudson. She faced problems because every time she was perceived to have slipped, the press were

after her. It is a difficult role, which she played exceptionally well. I wish her well in her retirement and thank her on my behalf and on behalf of the Standards Committee. I suspect that the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) will support the motion shortly.

As has been said, applicants were extensively sought, and 81 were reduced to six. Those six appeared before a small panel for interview. It included two Members of Parliament —the right hon. Member for Rother Valley and me. It was chaired by the Principal Clerk of the Table Office, whom I thank for her exceptional chairmanship. All interviewees were put through their paces gently—and sometimes not quite so gently. All their advantages and, indeed, some foibles, were drawn out. The panel's final decision on the two who went forward for final selection was unanimous and solid. I endorse Kathryn Stone's appointment. Having been part of the interview process, I believe that she will prove an excellent choice and I look forward to her joining us in due course.

1.31 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I am very pleased to support the motion to appoint Kathryn Stone as the next Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. As the former Chair, and now the Chair-in-waiting of the Committee on Standards, I was involved in the appointment process during the initial selection stage and the first round of interviews, when we greatly benefited from the help of an external member of the board, Dr Jane Martin. I would like to record the House's appreciation of Jane's wise advice.

We recommended two highly able and appointable candidates for the final stage interviews so the Commission could not go wrong, but I am very pleased that Kathryn Stone has been put forward. I believe that her experience in some very sensitive situations and her personal qualities will form the foundation for a successful and effective term of office as Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. I wish her well in the role, subject to the House's approving the motion today.

I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to another Kathryn, the outgoing Commissioner, Kathryn Hudson. Kathryn was the first Commissioner to be appointed after the establishment of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. She has, we hope, overseen the last of the legacy cases from the expenses scandal and has helped guide the House into calmer waters on standards.

There have been major changes, such as the introduction of lay members to the Committee on Standards and some major challenges, from inside and outside the House. Kathryn has acted throughout with great integrity and exemplary fairness and thoroughness. She has played a full part in developing the standards system and addressing the culture change needed to embed standards in everything we do and win back the confidence of the public.

I know that Kathryn will be sorry if the Committee on Standards cannot complete its work on the new code of conduct and guide to the rules before she departs in December. The general election has made that timetable very tricky, but whenever the new code and guide emerge for the House's approval, we will all appreciate the thoughtfulness and dedication that Kathryn put into

making it more relevant, more clearly expressed and more user-friendly than previous versions. Perhaps I could take this opportunity to ask that the Committee be re-formed as soon as possible to continue this work. My understanding is that it does not need a Committee of Selection to sit for that to happen. I hope that it can happen quickly.

The standards system has changed for the better in recent years, and no doubt it will continue to evolve as the equality of numbers between lay and elected members on the Committee on Standards makes itself felt. Some outside the House continue to call for the regulation of standards to be taken out of the hands of Parliament altogether; others question the multiplicity of regulators involved in overseeing the conduct of MPs.

Some 20 years after the first Commissioner arrived in the House, it may be time to start thinking about how the system as a whole works, but I am clear that the Commissioner's independence is something of great value, which has proved its worth. For the system to be effective we need a strong, fair Commissioner, whose integrity is beyond doubt. Kathryn Hudson has fulfilled that brief and I look forward to the new Commissioner continuing the tradition.

1.35 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, recognise the important role of the Commissioner for Standards in building and maintaining public confidence in the House and in Members' conduct. The public sometimes understand the phrase, "an hon. Member" to be some sort of honorific or title that Members enjoy, but I often reflect to constituents or visitors to this place that it is an injunction to us as Members to conduct ourselves honourably and to live up to the highest standards in

public life. Kathryn Hudson certainly impressed that responsibility on me and my colleagues on our election in 2015. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I pay tribute to her work over the years. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) mentioned some of the effective innovations, such as training. I thank Kathryn Hudson for all the help and support that she has provided to colleagues in her time as Commissioner and wish her all the very best for the future.

Kathryn Hudson's successor is recommended by the House of Commons Commission. I thank our outgoing Member of the Commission, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), for his work in recent years. This may be my best chance in the Chamber to pay tribute to my predecessor as SNP Chief Whip, Mike Weir. I thank him for all his wisdom, support, advice and friendship before and since the general election. I am conscious of having big shoes to fill and I am glad to have my hon. Friends the Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Glasgow East (David Linden) to help me.

I join other Members in warmly welcoming the appointment of Kathryn Stone, who was clearly a very well qualified and highly respected candidate. She met with the approval of the interview panel and the House of Commons Commission, and we wish her all the very best for her term of office. I hope that, if we as Members live up to the standards that are expected of us, her case load will be appropriately light.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Kathryn Stone be appointed Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards on the terms of the Report of the House of Commons Commission, HC 294, dated 19 July 2017.

Summer Adjournment

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before I call the first colleague to speak, I draw it to the House's attention that a great many people wish to speak, that we have a limited amount of time and that, if colleagues wish to be courteous, it would be helpful if they spoke for no more than seven or seven and a half minutes. If everybody takes about seven minutes, all colleagues will have a chance to make the points that they wish to make. I realise that it is not fair because the first speaker has not had previous warning, but I am sure that he can tailor his remarks accordingly. I call Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger.

1.38 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I saw the way you looked at me and I realised that I was front gunner on this one. First, I wish you and all colleagues a happy recess.

This debate is always important. It is the one time of the year when Members can say pretty much what we like to try to get the points across. I will try to keep within the time limit, but I will fail dismally. Please forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I appreciate the chance to address the House on a matter of considerable concern to 35,000 of my constituents in West Somerset. Our local district council is in mortal danger. Three years ago, it was lured into a relationship with Taunton Deane. Now West Somerset could lose all its staff, its offices and above all, its pride. The relationship with Taunton is starting to turn abusive. I am sorry to say that that was predictable. Taunton Deane has a very bad reputation. It was always a grubby and unsuitable partner, and it has wanted only one thing. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) is not in her place—I understand that as she has a lot to do. Yesterday, however, she was singing the praises of Taunton Deane at Prime Minister's questions, including talking about its house building record. There are certainly thousands of houses and plans for thousands more, but there is nothing in the way of infrastructure, schools or surgeries—there are just houses.

Taunton Deane is actually run by a builder, God help us, who offers a friendly nod and a wink to any other builder he knows. Left to his own devices, Councillor Williams would lay concrete all over Somerset. The suspiciously close relationship between the leadership and certain big players in this industry is legendary. When I first mentioned the names Summerfield and John Williams in Parliament some months ago, I got a quick response from both of them. It was a co-ordinated denial; they had obviously talked and responded in unison. Actually, they could almost be brothers with a genuine family connection—perhaps they are. They are certainly brothers in aprons, not that being a mason is a crime.

But it is curious how many big projects in Taunton Deane go Summerfield's way. It builds a new premises for Taunton Deane's direct labour force—a nice little

earner. The latest wheeze is Nexus 25, next to junction 25 of the M5, designed to be a business park. Summerfield owns the land, which prompts the question: why did it buy it? For years building anything on that side of the M5 has been considered out of bounds; a very small amount of social housing was possible, understandably, but nothing else. Back in 2007 Summerfield bought the social housing arm known as My Home and applied to Taunton Deane to build an estate of affordable houses near Henlade. Then an upright planning officer looked at the plans and put his foot down: "Too big," he said, "Too many houses. Make it smaller." Oh dear. Summerfield refused to downscale; instead, it walked away.

It was not until around 2012 that a different housing association secured permission for a smaller development in the same area. But Summerfield probably never surrendered its interests in the land, and recently paid £1 million for a large plot of land near Henlade—which could never, surely, be built upon. It has no obvious access, unless, of course, Summerfield has already taken out options on land that adjoins it. I do not know; I would probably need to talk to a very well-connected land agent to find out. I wonder if, perhaps, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane knows of one.

Anyway, this Summerfield land is surely safe from housing unless a big dual carriageway ever gets built—and, abracadabra, yesterday my hon. Friend was on her feet going all gooey-eyed about the investment in the A358. I know that Highways England has proposed a scheme to upgrade the A358, and I also know that my hon. Friend has been publicly saying that it is the wrong scheme. She also mentioned Taunton's record on unemployment; actually, it is a record regularly beaten by Sedgemoor. Yesterday the hon. Lady unfortunately failed to tell that to the Prime Minister, but never mind. I have seen the true face of Taunton Deane and its leader, and I do not like what I see. Why West Somerset fell for Councillor Williams and his smooth patter, I will never fully understand.

The leadership of my council would not consider taking help from any of our neighbours, including its nearest, Sedgemoor, which happens to be one of the best run councils in the United Kingdom. Sedgemoor has very healthy finances and would have helped sort out West Somerset's problems and treated it with the respect my constituents deserve. But the old guard preferred to deal with Taunton. Now West Somerset risks being raped.

"Rape" is a strong word indeed, but it accurately describes what is happening in the relationship with Taunton Deane. The people of West Somerset have not been properly consulted, so Taunton can never claim it has had meaningful consent. Taunton Deane has muscled in like the bully that it is, and West Somerset has had to lie down and submit to a full-blown merger.

West Somerset is, I am proud to say, the smallest authority in England. The council has always found it hard to balance its books, because there are not enough people to pay the bills—I am one of the taxpayers. However, with intelligent planning and skilful cost cutting, West Somerset has made a budget that works—which is a great accolade to some of the councillors. They are on target for the budget to be properly balanced this year and probably next year, too. They do not need an abusive, aggressive partner.

Taunton Deane was—and still is—desperately short of money. It is squandering huge sums on a worthless head office and this week started procuring millions of pounds-worth of new computer equipment. It does not need either. Its mismanagement of money is a standing joke in local government. In the long term, I believe that Taunton Deane wants to get its greedy hands on the Hinkley Point business rates. For West Somerset this is rape followed by robbery, all planned by Taunton's dodgy leader, Councillor John Williams.

Councillor Williams has a long and undistinguished record for getting everything wrong. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Southwest One, an appalling IT project that cost the taxpayers of Somerset £80 million and saved nothing. The regime he runs smiles on developers and reeks of shady deals. My constituents will not have the wool pulled over their eyes. They are not stupid; they can smell a rat—they know what one looks like, and, if they were given the chance, I am sure they would reject this half-baked scheme.

My hope is that the Secretary of State will opt for a sensible option and allow thorough independent scrutiny by the Boundaries Commission and a proper consultation with the public. My constituents want to keep their council—and so they should.

1.45 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and I eagerly want to visit his constituency to meet all these house builders with whom he is in dispute. I do not think they stand much of a chance, being up against the hon. Gentleman.

I welcome the presence on the Labour Front Bench of the new shadow Deputy Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who will be making her maiden contribution in this debate, and, of course, the ever-present Deputy Leader of the House, who will be winding up. I have to apologise for the fact that, unfortunately, I have an unbreakable commitment in Leicester and might not be able to be here for the winding-up speeches. However, I will read *Hansard* with great care. I also had no idea I was going to be called so early.

I make no apology for starting this debate by talking about the situation in Yemen. Despite the catastrophic situation within the state, we are currently experiencing an even worse crisis. In the course of Yemen's civil war there have been well over 10,000 civilian deaths, 19.4 million Yemenis are without access to healthcare, 3 million are now suffering from acute malnutrition, and over 3 million are internally displaced. One child dies every 10 minutes.

Last week the United Nations announced that there were 300,000 cholera cases in Yemen countrywide, in 22 of Yemen's 23 provinces. If current rates of cholera stay the same, from the time we enter recess to when this House returns on 5 September, up to 225,000 extra cases will be added to that number. The United Nations calls this the worst cholera crisis in the world.

Along with the spread of the disease, there has been the chronic destruction of medical infrastructure caused by the civil war, which has exacerbated the crisis. Despite the assistance given by organisations such as Médecins sans Frontières, Islamic Relief, the Yemen Safe Passage Group, the UNHCR, and the Red Cross, the situation

in Yemen is getting much worse. We heard only today that a number of journalists had been prevented from landing in Sana'a.

While we go to our constituencies to do the work that all Members have to do during the recess, we must not forget what is happening in Yemen. I hope that a message from the Front Bench will go back to the Foreign Office that we expect to see Ministers fully engaged in the crisis that continues to unfold.

This week I was elected chair of the new all-party group on immigration and visas, and I am delighted to see the vice-chair of the group here, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I am also very pleased that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) was elected as the secretary. The group's purpose is to raise, on an all-party basis, issues of concern about the way in which our immigration and visa system operates. We all have critical constituency cases involving people who wish to travel, or whose relatives are not allowed to come into the country. For instance, the wedding of a constituent of mine is taking place at the end of August, but the best man is not being allowed to come here. Trying to convince officials who are thousands of miles away is extremely difficult.

I hope this group will, in a measured way, explore these circumstances, especially the role of the account managers and the issue of same-day service. I have a case of somebody who applied for a same-day visa, paid the fee of £500 on top of the fee of £1,000 for their visa, and six months later the situation has not been resolved. It is important that we look at these issues in a constructive way.

I hope that, over the summer, Ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Home Office will be trying to fashion a plan for the 3.2 million EU citizens living in the United Kingdom. We have heard the Prime Minister's welcome assurance that they will be allowed to stay, but the process of issuing the necessary documentation could take a long time. There is now a backlog of 100,000 cases at the Home Office. Some of those citizens arrived here without passports because they could enter the UK with identity cards from EU countries. Getting them processed will be extremely difficult.

I hope that those Ministers will also look into the suggestion of a pilot scheme for allowing EU citizens to register at local level. They could take their passports along to the local authority and get themselves checked and registered. That information could then be handed on to the Home Office. The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), is a former member of the Home Affairs Committee, and he will be well aware of these issues. I hope that he will pass that suggestion on.

I want to make two quick constituency points before I end. The first concerns the continuing campaign being led by Amy Morgan, a young mother in Leicester whose son, Tyler, was stabbed to death a year and a half ago. Another of my constituents, Isaac Williams, was stabbed to death in April this year. We need to do more to tackle knife crime. I introduced a Bill to increase the length of time people spend in prison for carrying a knife. Statistics show a 24% rise in the incidence of knife crime. That is a huge increase, with 12,074 offences and 2,381 detentions last year. Secondly, I am hoping to organise a meeting in my constituency involving those

[Keith Vaz]

who have control of our theme parks, following the death earlier this year of my 11-year-old constituent, Evha Jannath. It is extremely important that families who visit theme parks should be as safe as possible.

Speaking as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes, and as someone who has type 2 diabetes, let me end by issuing a challenge to Members. I want to commend the Pioppi diet, and I will write to the 100 Members who have the most diabetics in their constituencies about this. Of course, we all have diabetics in our constituencies, but the Library has provided me with statistics for the top 100. I think that Doncaster might be on that list, Madam Deputy Speaker. I shall ask those Members to take up the challenge of the Pioppi diet, which is named after a village in Italy where people live on average to the age of 97 as a result of their Mediterranean diet. It involves getting rid of sugar, which is a killer, keeping away from potatoes—and, for me, rice—and concentrating instead on the good food that is available around the Mediterranean. We have wonderful farms and food makers in this country, but we do not spend enough time looking at what we eat.

We have a diabetes epidemic in the United Kingdom. There are 4 million people with type 2 diabetes in this country, and 500,000 more—some of whom are in this House today—who do not know that they have the condition. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is an officer of the APPG, and I am sure that he will be taking up the Pioppi diet challenge—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If it helps me to live to 97, I definitely will.

Keith Vaz: I know that all Democratic Unionist party Members would like to live to be 97, especially in the current climate.

I will be writing to those 100 Members, urging them to take up that challenge. I want to thank Dr Aseem Malhotra, the world-famous cardiologist, and Donal O'Neill, a renowned film-maker from Ireland, for writing the incredible book, “The Pioppi Diet”. I want everyone to take it up for 28 days in August and to see, when they come back, whether it has made a difference. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to wish you, the Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, all Members and all Officers of the House a happy and peaceful recess. We hope that nothing will bring us back during the recess, as has happened in the past. We want a bit of political stability so that we can enjoy our summer.

1.54 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the summer recess, I wish to raise a number of points. Putting it mildly, the general election was not a great success for the party to which I belong. Against that background, there were also terrorist attacks that affected us all, and when we returned here, the Grenfell disaster happened. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) will ensure that the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group on the retrofitting

of sprinklers, the reviewing of building regulations and the insistence that sprinklers are put into all new school buildings are acted on.

At the heart of my personal general election campaign was a local row about whether our accident and emergency provision had a future. I told my constituents that, just as I had worked with others 20 years ago to ensure that Basildon A&E did not close, this time I would work to ensure that Southend hospital would not be downgraded. I am pleased to tell the House that at 1 o’clock today, a press release was issued by the Success Regime stating that it was going to develop

“a revised model that would enable all three current A&E departments to continue to treat people who need emergency hospital care, including continuing to receive ‘blue light’ emergency patients with serious conditions.”

I thank all those constituents and others who came to see me in my surgery to make representations about this issue. I know that the news will also please colleagues in neighbouring constituencies. We were pleased to have a visit from the Countess of Wessex to the foetal medicine unit at Southend hospital. That was greatly welcomed.

I have a constituent who is suffering from the effects of asbestos. His health was damaged during his time working for the National Dock Labour Board a long time ago. As his Member of Parliament, I will not give up until we get justice from the board, because his health has been ruined.

Recently a constituent who is a music artist was verbally abused and mugged on a C2C train travelling from West Ham to Leigh-on-Sea. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will make representations to the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that we can have security on local train services.

Another constituent has contacted me about the situation in Venezuela. A Supreme Court ruling in March 2017 saw the Venezuelan Parliament stripped of its democratic powers, and the regime is attempting to introduce a new constitution without consultation. I hope that the House will unite behind the people of Venezuela, whose democracy is being absolutely ruined.

A number of parliamentarians gathered in Paris last month, and we attended a rally hosted by the National Coalition of Resistance to support its leader, Maryam Rajavi, who is asking for justice for the 1988 massacre of Iranian citizens and calling for an end to the ballistic missile programme in Iran. Those are pressing concerns there.

Two months ago, I went on a trip to Switzerland—it seems as though I am travelling the world, Madam Deputy Speaker—where I and other colleagues met representatives of the World Trade Organisation. We learned at first hand how the problems that are being shared among colleagues about the difficulty of our leaving the European Union and being unable to secure good trade deals are a lot of nonsense.

Locally, parents are concerned about primary school catchment areas. I regret the stresses being put on parents at Chalkwell School, in Leigh-on-Sea and in the west Leigh catchment areas. As a Conservative Member of Parliament, I believe that all schools should be able to expand if at all possible, and I hope that the heads and governing bodies will reflect on that. Three wonderful headteachers in Southend are retiring, having dedicated their lives to educating our young people. I pay tribute

to Margaret Sullivan of Our Lady of Lourdes, Jenny Davies of Westborough and Margaret Rimmer of our very special Kingsdown School, where the wife of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) is the chair of the governing body.

Yesterday at Prime Minister's questions I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) urging the Government to fulfil their manifesto promise to lift the 50% admission cap on free faith schools, so that more excellent Catholic schools can develop in our constituencies. I am delighted that we now have a new school run by the Figure of Eight Education which works with local secondary schools to provide individual, personalised education for young people who are under threat of being permanently excluded.

I and other Members are absolutely sickened by the pay of certain senior employees at the BBC. I am absolutely horrified and would be happy to offer my services on a part-time basis to host any number of shows.

I am delighted to say that the Royal British Legion's "Poppies: Wave" event was a huge success in Southend, with thousands coming to see it. I am also happy to say that Bob O'Leary, the honorary secretary of the local Royal British Legion, successfully applied for heritage lottery funding for a Southend schools festival of remembrance, which will be run by the not-for-profit organisation Blade Education. I know that it will be a great success.

I support local residents who are going to work together to restore our magnificent Grand hotel.

I hope that most people know that Southend is the alternative city of culture. Just before the general election, stilt walkers went non-stop from Southend to No. 10 Downing Street to ask for Southend to be made a city. Why we are not a city already I do not know—it must be an oversight. We had a wonderful fashion show in Priory Park recently, where wonderful models wore garments made from Buckingham Palace's discarded tablecloths, curtains and so on. Southend carnival will be celebrating an event in August, which coincides with the 125th anniversary of the borough. If any colleagues want something to do, come to Southend-on-Sea.

N-Act, a theatre-in-education organisation, is doing a wonderful job providing interactive tours for schools and using drama to explore current affairs. The Kings Money Advice Centre is doing a wonderful job locally in Southend. Carillion has been responsible for providing about 3,000 people with Warm Front assistance, bringing many of them out of fuel poverty. Seetec is also doing a wonderful job of ensuring that young people in Southend secure suitable employment. The Village Green event in Chalkwell Park was attended by more than 15,000 local residents and was a great success.

Finally, I wish Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, all colleagues and the wonderful staff who work in the House of Commons a great summer rest.

2.2 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who chairs the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group, of which I am the secretary. I am pleased that he managed to mention us in his

contribution. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her place on the Opposition Front Bench; it is good to see her there this afternoon. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in this debate, and I am confident that, like the hon. Member for Southend West, I will be able to finish within the seven-minute limit prescribed by Madam Deputy Speaker earlier. I want to discuss four issues: the Island Health Trust scandal in my constituency; leasehold reform; fire service duties, including approved document B; and the accountability of housing associations and registered social landlords.

Island Health Trust is the landlord for a health centre in my constituency. The trust's main sources of income are the rent paid by the NHS and service charges paid by the doctors. From that, the Island Health Trust has accumulated a surplus of some £1.3 million. Despite those reserves, the landlord is charging the practice an unaffordable service charge, leading it to vacate the first floor of the health centre and a loss of services. The trust was originally managed by local trustees, and any surplus was used to fund local health initiatives through a modest grants programme. That changed on 1 April 2016 when the chair, Suzanne Goodband, appointed a new board of people with no local connection. Serious allegations have been made relating to the governance and business management of the trust, including trustees' personal financial advantage. In 2015-16, the chair was paid £179,176 for consultancy services in a charitable trust with a turnover of just £270,000. Many believe that the health centre, the land upon which it stands and the £1.3 million reserves are public assets, that the trust should be run by local trustees, and that the £1.3 million should be invested to support patients and health services for local people. I have written to Health Ministers and to the Charity Commission asking for urgent meetings to discuss intervention to prevent asset stripping and personal profit by individuals who seem to be more interested in their own wellbeing than that of the NHS and local patients.

The Government have been sending some positive signals on leasehold reform. The housing White Paper and the Conservative party manifesto both refer to greater fairness and transparency for leaseholders. In reaction, several housing developers have voluntarily addressed the rip-off known as the doubling of ground rents and, to their credit, have changed their policies, but regulation is still urgently needed in this area. Other areas that need attention include a fairer land valuation tribunal system, rights for leaseholders against exorbitant service charges, events fees, refurbishment costs and so on, protection for pensioners in retirement homes, and protection against unfair forfeiture proceedings for vulnerable leaseholders. Those and many other matters rightly deserve Government action and the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and which now has more than 90 members, will welcome some progress. Indeed, the Prime Minister's written statement this morning on "Machinery of Government Changes" included moving commonhold law from Ministry of Justice to the Department for Communities and Local Government, which seems a sensible step.

I commend the hon. Member for Worthing West on EDM 207 regarding commonhold reform, and I encourage hon. and right hon. Members from across the House to

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

support it. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who is the new vice-chair of the APPG. He has submitted a number of searching parliamentary questions on the topic, and his keen interest, along with that of so many other colleagues, is welcome.

Questions have arisen about the accountability of housing associations and registered social landlords. Accountability and transparency in this growing sector are overdue for examination. The Government's drive towards mergers and takeovers of smaller housing associations is taking social landlords further from their tenants and residents. While there are some good example of RSLs, especially in my constituency, others are not so good, and I hope to secure a debate with other colleagues after the recess to discuss that with Ministers. Perhaps the Backbench Business Committee will be interested in supporting it. As an example of unwelcome new initiatives, I received an email this morning from a constituent saying that one RSL is now offering loans to residents at 99.9% APR. I am unsure whether that is an appropriate thing for RSLs to do and will explore the matter further outside the Chamber, but I would have hoped that social landlords would be more interested in promoting the credit union movement and helping to set up more local credit unions than becoming loan agents.

The review of the building regulations fire guidance contained in approved document B is well overdue, and the hon. Member for Southend West has been campaigning on that with the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group for some time. I will not bore the House with the history of these matters, which is well documented, but ministerial statements from 2011 promised that a review would be complete by 2017. The Lakanal coroner recommended that that happen, and there have also been more recent recommendations. The review will be required whatever the findings of the public inquiry, so the sooner it can be started, the better.

Finally, I repeat my view that the fire service should be tasked with a statutory duty to deal with floods. They play a key role in every flood that happens, and they should not only have their work recognised, but get resources from the Government to do the job properly.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, other colleagues, the staff of the House and those who look after us a very decent break over the recess. We all know that it is not a holiday, but we are entitled to a break.

2.9 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). [*Interruption.*] Not right honourable? It is only a matter of time. He gave a typically robust and informative speech, demonstrating the value of these types of debates at the end of a parliamentary term. I want to raise several issues relating to aspects of parliamentary work that I have been and will continue to be involved in.

At the end of the previous Parliament, just before the general election, almost the last Act passed was the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which I had the honour of piloting through this House; my hon. Friend

Lord Best piloted it through the other place. There are many measures that still require secondary legislation before the Act comes fully into force, which of course will be a revolution in the way homeless people are treated in this country. There is still a lot of work to do, including on statutory instruments that must be put before the House, but I trust that, even with the great repeal Bill and the forthcoming SIs, we will find sufficient time to ensure that the Act is brought to fruition, because many thousands of people up and down this country are desperately awaiting help.

There has been a flurry of annual general meetings of all-party groups in the last few weeks. I will just run through a few of the groups that I am involved with. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) referred to one group of which I succeeded in becoming vice-chair, following a hard-fought election. On the other groups, I am delighted, on behalf of the Action on Smoking and Health group, that the Government have at last announced the tobacco control plan. I congratulate the new Minister for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), on doing something that his three predecessors could not do, namely publishing the plan so that we get control of the tobacco industry, with some very strong targets towards a smoke-free Britain, which will be warmly welcomed by all concerned.

However, there is a deep threat to smoking cessation services across local authorities. Therefore, we should reiterate our call that it is vital that those services continue, and continue to be funded by local authorities. In my own borough, there is a threat to remove funding from the smoking cessation service, despite the fact that in the last four years 1,751 local people have been able to give up smoking. Yet we still have a high prevalence of smoking in my borough and it would not be good enough if the service ceased.

Equally, the all-party group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders met recently. We have 185 members in this House. May I send a strong signal via my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons that we will not cease in our work until justice has been done for every single one of those individuals who suffered from this scam? We are not going away, and we are not happy that there is still a huge sum of money—£2.7 billion—owed to the victims.

The all-party group on Azerbaijan heard of the dreadful attack that took place in the hotly disputed and illegally occupied territory of Nagorno-Karabakh earlier this month. A two-year-old girl and her grandmother were deliberately killed by Armenian forces. The reality is that that is a war crime, which needs to be thoroughly investigated by the authorities, and the perpetrators should be brought to justice in front of the International Criminal Court.

There are several other issues that the Government need to bear in mind. The UN's Human Rights Council will meet from 11 to 29 September, shortly after we return to this House. There are a number of issues for it to consider. I have mentioned Azerbaijan, but there is also the issue of justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the absolutely outrageous and disgraceful genocide of political prisoners in Iran in 1998, which needs a thorough international investigation. I hope that there will be a debate in Government time before the UN's HRC meets on the UK's priorities for that particular body and its

work, because we need to spread our message that human rights are vital. Under the last Government, it took six months for the Joint Committee on Human Rights to be set up in this House. It is a Government-appointed Committee and it is vital that it starts its work very soon and very quickly on an all-party basis.

When we come back after the recess, there will be an ongoing consultation—the Government have wisely enabled it to be extended—on removing caste as a protected characteristic from our equality legislation. I believe that consultation will now conclude on 14 September, having originally been due to conclude by the end of July. It is vital that the message goes out from this House that British Hindus have an opportunity to input to the Government consultation, so that the Government have the evidence they require to ensure we remove this ill thought-out, divisive and unnecessary legislation.

Keith Vaz: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his re-election as chair of the all-party group on British Hindus? I share his concern about that part of the legislation, which is causing concern among the Hindu community, as Harrow and Leicester are very similar in terms of their Hindu population, and I pledge my support for the campaign he has launched.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend—I will call him that here—for that intervention and I trust that he can persuade the members of his own party, not only in this House but in the other place, to support the Government on doing what we want to see happening for British Hindus up and down the country.

The final area I will touch on is the situation in Jammu and Kashmir. I have tabled an early-day motion, which I believe seven other hon. Members have signed, in relation to the attack on innocent Hindu pilgrims in Anantnag by Lashkar-e-Taiba, an internationally recognised terrorist group, led by Abu Ismail. The UK must stand with India to combat this international terrorism and to prevent the situation from escalating still further. There have been attempts in this country to celebrate Burhan Wani, who died last year. He was a murderous Islamic terrorist and the commander of Hizbul Mujahideen. There was an attempt in Birmingham to hold a demonstration about his death, which would have been a direct challenge to the UK's values of harmony and tolerance. I am delighted that that demonstration was shut down before it happened, but the Government must do more to target all those who celebrate terrorists.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you, your colleagues—the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker—and all right hon. and hon. Members in the House a very happy recess? We will all be working in our constituencies, as has been mentioned, on behalf of our constituents, with—no doubt—a brief holiday in the next few weeks.

2.17 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and I welcome his support for both smoking cessation and human rights around the world. I also thank Madam Deputy Speaker for the opportunity to make my maiden speech this afternoon.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Rob Wilson, who was our MP in Reading East for 12 years. He was the Minister for civil society and I thank him for his public

service. I will also mention other former colleagues: Jane Griffiths, the Labour MP, who served before Rob; and Gerry Vaughan, the Conservative, who predated her. Other illustrious MPs from the Reading area include Martin Salter and Labour's Ian Mikardo, who represented Reading in the post-war period. Going slightly further back in history, I am particularly proud to follow in the footsteps of the first Labour MP for Reading, the surgeon Somerville Hastings, who was elected in 1923, and whose ideas about the state funding of healthcare were an early forerunner of the NHS.

During its long history, Reading has changed beyond all recognition. Once home to one of the largest abbeys in England and the burial place of King Henry I, it later grew to become a light industrial town. Many years ago, our local economy consisted of brewing, biscuit-making and horticulture—the “three B's”, as they were then known, with the word “bulbs” replacing “horticulture”.

While the terraced streets and Victorian town centre remain, in the late 20th century Reading became home to insurance firms, and more recently the IT industry. Several international IT and telecoms firms are based nearby and they play an important role, both in the local economy and in the economy of the UK as a whole.

We have a youthful population, with many young people and families moving to our area to make their home in the town. People come from across Britain, from across Europe and indeed from around the wider world.

Several issues loom large for our community, which is young and mobile: first and foremost, the need for properly funded public services; the desire to avoid a hard Brexit; and, as other Members have mentioned, the importance of affordable and safe housing.

Local people rely on and, indeed, expect high-quality provision of public services, and the general election was a resounding vote against austerity and poorly funded services—that was felt and heard very loudly in our part of the world. I remind the Government that parents were angered by the wave of school cuts, and parents in my area remain deeply concerned, despite the window-dressing offered by Ministers last week. Meanwhile, many other residents are fearful of the state of our local NHS, and they certainly have no time for the dementia tax.

Our town is proudly international in outlook, with significant numbers of residents from the EU and, indeed, from the Commonwealth. Reading voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, and many local people oppose a hard Brexit, including many who voted to leave. Our residents are not impressed by the Government's cavalier approach to the negotiation with the EU, and they expect something much better, which I hope we will soon see.

Although it is well known that IT and science workers in the south of England command high salaries, house prices are also high and not all work in our area is well paid. In fact, many people exist on very modest earnings indeed. Reading, rather like London, regrettably suffers from considerable income inequality, which leads to even greater issues with housing affordability. As a result, there is a desperate need for more affordable housing: council houses, affordable homes to buy and, indeed, homes to rent. Our local renters particularly deserve a fair deal.

[*Matt Rodda*]

The Government's record on housing is extremely poor. In recent times, George Osborne effectively stopped Reading's Labour council building 1,000 new council houses, despite significant need in the area. More recently, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has allowed developers to reduce the proportion of affordable homes in new developments, which is an important point in an area with a lot of extra building going on. I am proud to say that Reading and, indeed, Conservative West Berkshire Council have taken legal action to oppose that reduction. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will note that, although I wish to work with the Housing Minister, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), I will be holding him to account for matters relating to housing, particularly the local situation in the Thames valley.

As some colleagues may know, I have been campaigning to save a much-loved local secondary school that was threatened with closure, and we have had some good news this week. Chiltern Edge School is in Oxfordshire but, as in many urban areas, many pupils cross our boundaries. Earlier this year, I was shocked to find out that Oxfordshire County Council was planning to shut the school, which would have affected 400 Reading children. I have always believed that its proposal was both irresponsible and misguided, and I cannot understand why any local authority in an area—such as the south of England—with rising school rolls would want to consider a school closure at this time. The only plausible explanation is that selling off the land would have allowed the council to deal with short-term financial pressures caused by austerity.

However, after a great deal of work by campaigners, supported by me and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), we have been successful and Oxfordshire County Council has now decided to shelve the plans. I am grateful for that decision, and I thank colleagues who signed my early-day motion opposing the closure and who have supported the “save our Edge” campaign. Although that is one small local campaign, I believe it shows something of great value: it underlines the importance of our public services; it shows how a well-fought local campaign can achieve results; and above all, it shows that real change is possible in our country.

I am honoured to represent my community, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. I look forward to raising other matters of importance when the House returns in September. I wish all my colleagues a very happy recess.

2.24 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on his maiden speech, in which he paid tribute to his predecessor—his predecessor was well known to Conservative Members—and to many other predecessors. I am sure we will be hearing much from the hon. Gentleman, perhaps particularly on the key aspects of Reading's regeneration. Those of us who travel regularly through Reading appreciate the work that has been done on Reading station. Anything he can do to keep the station working smoothly will be much appreciated.

Ten years ago to this very day, 12 continuous hours of heavy rainfall downloaded 78 mm of rain in Gloucestershire during what our local paper, the *Citizen*, rightly called

“the worst natural disaster in the county's living memory.”

It followed the wettest June and July since records began in 1766. It is worth recapping what happened, what has happened since and the wider lessons that we should have learned—I hope we have learned them.

I will start by recalling what happened on that day, which is as clear in my memory now as it was on the day itself. Some 10,000 motorists were stuck between junctions 10 and 12 of the M5. I remember afterwards meeting a deaf constituent who had been trapped in his car on the M5, and who did not hear the police when they came to ask everyone to move their vehicles. As so often in a crisis, a combination of accident, the situation at the time and a particular individual's health resulted in a sort of comic-tragic misunderstanding, of which there were many during this extraordinary period of natural disaster.

Some 500 people were stranded at Gloucester rail station. Severn Trent's Mythe water treatment centre lost power, and 350,000 people were without running water for 18 days. The Castle Mead electricity substation was overwhelmed, cutting power to almost 50,000 of my constituents. Some 4,000 houses, 500 businesses and 20 schools were flooded, and three people died.

There was a precedent. Curiously, 400 years earlier, in 1607, there was a great flood in Gloucestershire in which huge and mighty hills of water some 25-feet high swept up the Bristol channel, spread over 200 square miles of land and killed 2,000 people. The great Gloucestershire flood 400 years later, in July 2007, was different and resulted in much less loss of life, but its impact on all of us was huge, and it almost led to a national crisis. I make no apology for saying that what was important then—and is important now in Kensington—was to start with absolute objectivity in looking at what happened, rather than trying to use disaster as a party political opportunity.

The critical moment in Gloucester was when Severn Trent's water was knocked out. The Army came in to deliver water and bowsers, and a number of us got involved in organising volunteers to distribute the water in the supermarket and other carparks. I organised a group of about 25 volunteers, and it all went fairly well. The council then asked me to organise taking water to elderly people at home, which was all set up and ready to start when somebody from the city council asked whether we all had Criminal Records Bureau checks. I said that I had no idea but that I would sign a bit of paper personally guaranteeing that no one in the volunteer group was either a granny basher or a paedophile. That was not good enough, and our volunteers had to stand down. I wondered then, and I still wonder now, at what point exactly in a civil disaster situation comes the moment when organisations drop the normal bureaucratic checks because something has to be done fast and we have to cut corners and accept some risk in order to save lives. Leadership at all levels in natural or other disasters is critical, as we have been reminded since the ghastly inferno at Grenfell Tower.

Meanwhile, down at the tri-service centre at Waterwells in Quedgeley, the then Chief Constable, Tim Brain, as Gold Commander, had powers to organise national and local bodies in one building. For the first time in a long time, the Army got seriously involved, particularly in sandbagging the electrical substation at Walham and delivering capabilities across the area. These Gold

Command structures are crucial, but they work only if residents trust the lead individual and organisation. If that does not happen, the Government have to step in and bring in other individuals and organisations, as we have seen in Kensington.

After the floods, the Pitt review was undertaken to analyse the issue, learn the lessons and make recommendations on how to mitigate floods of the future. The Government of the day were slow to implement those, but much progress has since been made, with brooks and streams cleared; willows cut back; riparian responsibilities better known; Flood Re established to handle insurance issues; and Victorian sewers and drains replaced, notably in the city centre, in the wards of Westgate and Kingsholm, at a cost of some £13 million, absorbed by Severn Trent. Those are huge improvements and there has been no flooding in Worcester Street or Kingsholm Road since, despite two years of considerable new floods, although not on the same scale.

The major Government and county council-financed additional infrastructure is the new diversion lake close to Elmbridge Court, which is on the road towards the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), where surplus water coming down the Horsbere brook is automatically transferred. That has already successfully prevented flooding in Longlevens and Elmbridge twice since 2007, as well as adding a superb walk and birdwatching site to our city's leisure facilities. Lastly, the Environment Agency has improved its mapping, modelling and communications no end, thanks to better technology. Anyone living near the Severn can now get regular email and text alerts, and I encourage all my constituents to do so; they just need to go on to the EA's website and sign up.

There are things still to be resolved, such as the height of the wall protecting homes by the river at Pool Meadow, on the northern side of Gloucester—that has still to be sorted. We also know that, if extraordinary events happen again, such as the 1607 surge or mini-tsunami, Gloucester and Tewkesbury would once again be in the eye of the storm. Therefore, we must ensure that watercourses are kept clear, man-made defences are maintained, crisis planning is kept up to date, structures are reviewed, substations are protected and contingency plans are in place. We also need to be cautious about giving planning permission for homes on floodplains and to consider the remotest contingency, as who could have anticipated the events of 1607 or 2007? We may not have to wait 400 years for the next natural disaster.

It is worth highlighting the role of local media in providing brilliant information during crises of this kind, and I know that today all regional media will be running huge articles and reports on what happened 10 years ago. They will highlight the value of resilience; the power of communities; and the importance of everyone pulling together in a crisis. That is relevant to us all here, as parties, as constituencies and as a country. The Brexit negotiations are different from the Gloucestershire floods or the Grenfell Tower inferno, but for them and for all other crises we still need resilience, leadership and shared purpose, in order to get through the crisis. The word “crisis” translates as “danger opportunity” in Chinese. We have to deal with the danger and realise the opportunity to be much better prepared for the next challenge that life throws at us all. Today, across Gloucestershire, we

will remember what happened, reflect on the lessons and pray that other communities do not face such natural disasters as the one we faced 10 years ago.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I join others in wishing colleagues time with their families and constituents during the recess, and in thanking all staff in Parliament for all their hard work and kindness, not least in looking after our security here.

2.33 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): May I welcome you to your post in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I believe this is the first time I have had the privilege of speaking under your chairmanship? May I also say what a pleasure it is to see the shadow Deputy Leader of the House in her place and welcome her to her position?

It is a pleasure to follow such excellent speeches, including the one made by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). Wakefield, too, was hit in those terrible 2007 floods. We had £13 million of flood defences put in and we have so far escaped further flooding. Resilience, citizenship and leadership—the things he mentioned—are all too alive and well in the minds of people in Wakefield today as we remember those floods. It was also a pleasure to hear the maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). He will be a doughty fighter for his constituents. I certainly learnt something about Reading’s history; I thought it was just the prison, but brewing, biscuits and bulbs sounds like a sound base for economic development for his city.

I want to talk about CAPA College, an outstanding school in Wakefield but one that sadly will not be able to take lower-sixth students in September and whose future hangs in the balance after Ministers attempted to move the college to Leeds. What a sorry, sad tale this is.

CAPA College has been the sixth-form provision at Cathedral Academy, a Church of England secondary school in Wakefield, for the past 10 years. It is the only sixth-form in the city of Wakefield. It delivers 28 hours a week of specialist performing arts teaching, and it is unique in West Yorkshire and, dare I say it, in the whole of the north of England, for the standard of performing arts teaching it provides. I pay tribute to my constituent Claire Nicholson, CAPA’s director, and the brilliant, sublime production of “West Side Story” by 16-year-olds which I had the privilege of watching a couple of weeks ago. It was the most wonderful performance of that show that I have ever seen.

In September 2015, CAPA College and its sponsor, the Leeds diocese, through the Enhance Academy Trust, received permission from the Minister to open as a free school. A year later, the Department for Communities and Local Government made a conditional agreement for the sale and purchase of a site in Leeds city centre, and the Education Funding Agency agreed to provide two years’ interim funding to allow CAPA College to stay in Wakefield until the site in Leeds obtained the necessary planning permissions—the new free school could open in September 2018. However, documents that I obtained from Leeds City Council show that, after the planning application was submitted, it emerged that the building is on the route of HS2. Leeds City Council rejected the planning application because of concerns about road safety and congestion; it is not a

[*Mary Creagh*]

suitable site for a school. We are talking about the former home of KPMG in Leeds. KPMG obviously got out; it sold it on to a German consortium. That consortium realised that it had perhaps bought a pup and sought to sell it on to someone else—and who better than the UK Government to know what the UK Government are doing!

The Education Funding Agency has rescinded its two-year funding offer to my local school until CAPA College has found a new building. That has forced the trust to inform potential new students that places will not be available to them; in effect, there is no year 12 student admission to CAPA college this year because of this building fiasco. The college has had to issue redundancy notices to staff, whose employment will end on 31 August. I know that the trust is working with Wakefield Council and the EFA to find a new permanent home for CAPA in Wakefield; we made it, we grew it, we developed it and we want to keep it. But why did the EFA continue with a planning application after being told that the site would have a high-speed rail line through it by 2032? Is this seriously a good use of taxpayers' money? Why was another site for CAPA College not identified as soon as it was known that there was a problem with this one? How much has the EFA spent on this site? Has the EFA completed the sale, even though HS2 will run through it and Leeds City Council has refused the planning application? If so, how much has it paid, or has it pulled out of the contract—in which case, how much has it lost?

I wrote to the Education Secretary in March to seek answers to those questions, but I have not received a reply. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will take my concerns back. The announcement this week of extra funding for England's schools is based on the fact that money that will be taken from the budget for new free schools, so there may be less money to enable CAPA College to find its new home in Wakefield. The fiasco has left CAPA College on the brink of closure, and dozens of dedicated staff and students unsure about their future. I have received letters from distraught students, alumni, parents and grandparents. The closure of CAPA College would damage the life chances of young people in Wakefield who aspire to go into the arts and would mean the closure of the only sixth form in Wakefield city centre.

The alumni have the chance to go on to perform in west end shows and tour all over the world, and I do not want to see the dreams of young people in Wakefield turned to dust. This September, we will see the opening of the advanced innovation and skills centre in Wakefield to deal with the historically low levels of tertiary education—higher education—in the city. We do not want to see one door opening in Wakefield while another one closes. I would like a substantive reply from the Minister and firm action from the EFA, so that those excellent teachers and that outstanding provision can be kept.

I pay tribute to the headteachers of the four secondary schools in my constituency: Miriam Oakley at Horbury Academy; Alan Warboys at Ossett Academy; Elizabeth Ford at Wakefield City Academy; and Rob Marsh at Cathedral Academy. I also pay tribute to Clare Kelly,

whose Dane Royd Junior and Infant School I visited recently. I wish all GCSE and A-level students good luck with their results when they come out in August.

I conclude by congratulating Simon Wallis, the director of the Hepworth gallery in Wakefield, which was crowned Art Fund museum of the year 2017. I think Wakefield is the only city to have had two Art Fund museums of the year—we also received the honour in 2013 for Yorkshire sculpture park, run by Pete Murray. Should Channel 4 consider a move to west Yorkshire, Wakefield stands ready with open arms to give it a warm, performance-related welcome. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the staff and, in particular, the builders who are beginning to put up the scaffolding on the Elizabeth tower, a safe and productive recess.

2.40 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (*Mary Creagh*), whose contribution highlights how useful these pre-recess debates can be for emphasising the important issues that face our constituents.

I want to highlight two or three constituency issues, but first I wish to raise a point of national concern, although it has sufficiently irritated a number of my constituents over the past 24 hours that they headed for their keyboards and sent me messages. I refer, of course, to the BBC and its somewhat extravagant use of licence-payers' money. We would all acknowledge that talent has to be paid for, but I question some of the figures we have seen. For example, I normally watch "News at Ten" if I am at home. If I am a bit late home, I might watch it an hour or two later on the BBC News channel. It is the same news reports, but there just happens to be a different news reader who it seems earns tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands less than his colleague who read the news an hour or two earlier. I question the somewhat unconvincing responses from BBC executives that have been broadcast over the past 24 hours.

The same applies to "Match of the Day", which I watch most weeks. Gary Lineker was an extremely talented footballer and could command enormous salaries when he was on the pitch. His latter-day role presenting "Match of the Day", which he does perfectly well, is fine, but other Members who watch the programme will have noticed that occasionally he has a holiday and someone comes off the subs' bench to present the programme. We see the same football and that person asks Alan Shearer or whoever exactly the same questions; does someone really need to be paid almost £2 million to do that when it is clear from the figures that somebody else is prepared to do it for £200,000 or £300,000, which would be a pretty well-paid job anyway? I have made my point, so I shall turn to some constituency issues.

Every constituency in the country has to contend with the issue of Travellers and their sites. Members from all parties will be well aware of how it irritates our constituents. It is not necessarily about the individuals themselves who, provided that they act responsibly and within the law, are perfectly entitled to their way of life; what annoys my constituents, quite justifiably, is that when they arrive on a site in Cleethorpes or wherever, the authorities leap into action to provide services for them that the rest of the community has to pay for.

It comes down to the simple fact that council tax payers often pay enormous amounts of money for services that in recent years have been cut back for all the reasons of which we are well aware, but councils always find money to spring into action to provide services for those who in most cases are not contributing.

I have no doubt that the Minister will tell us that the Government have made improvements to the legislation over the past six or seven years, and I am perfectly happy to accept that, but I urge the Deputy Leader of the House, when he reports back to other Ministers, to at least draw their attention to what I think my constituents and others would appreciate, which is what I shall call a more robust approach. The Government should not just say, “Oh, it’s up to councils to provide a site and so on”; that is fine, but let those who use that site understand clearly that they must contribute towards the cost.

Having been somewhat critical of it, perhaps I can praise the Government for the northern powerhouse initiative. It may have its faults, and it is concentrated too much on Leeds and Manchester, forgetting some other towns and cities in the north, but a few days ago *The Yorkshire Post* carried a story about a report by the Centre for Economics and Business Research and the law firm Irwin Mitchell that shows that in the past year or two northern cities have been growing faster than London. It praises George Osborne’s northern powerhouse, saying, for example, that the economy in Leeds has grown by 8% since the initiative was launched in 2014. It also mentions that Sheffield, York, Bradford and Hull have performed particularly well.

It is good news that, in the short term at least, our northern cities are contributing more and growing faster, but I urge the Deputy Leader of the House to convey to his colleagues that it is not only the cities in the north but the provincial towns and coastal communities that need help and support to grow. If they had a little extra help, I am sure that the northern powerhouse would be even more successful.

One way to make the initiative more successful for my constituency would be to provide us with a direct train service to London. With local authorities of all political colours, I have been involved in a long-running campaign on this issue. I recently met representatives from Virgin Trains, and I am hopeful that the new appraisal of the benefits to the economy that I hope the local authorities and local enterprise partnerships will produce will contribute to the overall goal. As we all know, better road and rail connections are crucial to the local economy. A little nudge from the Deputy Leader of the House, who is an influential person, could make an enormous difference. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all staff and Members a happy summer break.

2.47 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this summer Adjournment debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. As everyone else has, I wish colleagues and staff all the best for the recess. Of course, many of our colleagues—and their staff—who lost their seats might not have quite such a happy summer, as they face in some cases quite uncertain circumstances. I wish to say a little about the arrangements for non-returning MPs and their staff, and I hope it will command support from both sides of the House.

Before I do, though, I have always taken the view that an MP’s salary should be broadly in line with comparable professions and sufficient to meet the needs of living in two places—including in London, which is one of the most expensive cities in the world—but it should not be so high as to be the prime motivator for anyone seeking to become an MP. By and large, I believe, the current salary does that. The office allowance and travel arrangements are absolutely appropriate, and the allowance for staff should be sufficient to employ the correct number of caseworkers and other staff in our constituency offices. Again, since IPSA has given a rather generous increase to the staff allowance, that has most certainly been achieved.

Of course, the advent of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 has, or rather should have, provided more certainty for people seeking election or to work for an MP when they give up careers, professions and trades to do that. It is also worth noting that the recent salary increase for MPs was combined with changes to the MP pension scheme and the removal of the old resettlement allowance. At face value that is all fair and reasonable and, for the most part, it is. The reality of how easily the terms of the Act were overturned casts a bit of a shadow over what happens in practice, particularly for those who lose their seats, in the event of a short Parliament.

Irrespective of the expectation of a five-year term for Members and staff, the reality in the last Parliament was that many MPs’ staff members were entitled to precisely nothing—zero—by way of redundancy because they were employed for less than two years. That was inevitable, given that the Parliament itself was barely two years old. That simply cannot be right. As one non-returning MP put it:

“My own staff position seems to be typical; I have five in my team of whom four are to be paid no redundancy at all. This is because they worked less than two years (in some cases missing the cut by only a few weeks)...Many staff members gave up jobs, others gave up homes and moved to London, and some took out mortgages”

on the basis of a five-year contract made in good faith. They are now made redundant on terms that he says “would disgrace the most unscrupulous private corporation.”

Indeed, were there to be another election before 2019, which is certainly not inconceivable, any staff employed by a new MP of any party elected for the first time this June would likewise be entitled to absolutely nothing if the MP lost his or her seat. I would suggest, and I hope that this would command support, that at the very least in future redundancy should be paid to staff as per the contract, in the circumstances of a short Parliament, as if the members of staff had been employed for five years, particularly as the circumstances of a short Parliament are outwith the control of the staff, outwith the control of Members—and, given what we now know, were outwith even the knowledge of half the Cabinet when the Prime Minister called the election.

Likewise, the decision to call an election within the five-year timescale has left a number of non-returning MPs in a very difficult position, with many new ones being entitled to less than £3,000. Although IPSA is right to try to put things on a par with other workplaces, where we have ended up with the terms of redundancy for MPs appears to bear absolutely no relation to any professional contract I have ever seen.

[Stewart Hosie]

To put into some kind of context the combination of circumstances in which ex-MPs and their staff find themselves, I can tell the House what two have told me. One said:

“we are now trying to support staff who are receiving no help from IPSA—while not being paid ourselves to do so”.

He hopes that consideration can be given to finding the means to provide additional support to staff. Another said that he would not

“abandon my staff and former constituents, nor walk away from my responsibilities. But, it seems, that I am expected to manage my staff as their boss full time until the 8th August entirely unpaid. That cannot be right or fair.”

I am not arguing for a return to the old resettlement allowance regime, but the current situation must be changed. I believe it needs to be changed not just to help those who lost their seats in practical terms but to address a more difficult issue. If this situation continues and there is a series of short Parliaments leaving people in this position, massive limits will be placed on those choosing to stand for election or to work here. The huge strides all the parties have made to ensure that Parliament more accurately reflects society could be reversed, and that goes for staff as well as Members. If it is clear to those who might wish to come here that MPs who lose their seats after a short Parliament will come away with less than one month’s salary and their staff, in some cases, will come away with literally nothing at all, the only people who might seek election will be the independently wealthy or the kind of zealots who would do it for nothing. Nothing, but nothing, could be more different to society than a Parliament of MPs and staff drawn from such narrow groups.

Urgent action needs to be taken to ensure that staff redundancy is paid on the basis of a five-year contract, irrespective of how long a Parliament lasts, and MPs need to have a comparable professional termination package based on length of service but with a minimum safety net, not merely a few weeks’ salary. Let me repeat that I am not calling for the re-introduction of the old resettlement allowance, but the prospect of surrendering one’s career or trade to enter Parliament, losing one’s seat when it is not one’s fault and then being presented with less than one month’s salary will be a massive disincentive to others who would seek to do this public service. IPSA needs to be flexible.

Finally, a winding-up allowance of around £50,000 or so is available to each MP, but it appears from non-returned colleagues that there are huge restrictions on how that can be used. My judgment is that, with little imagination, IPSA could easily pay staff redundancy for those who serve less than two years in the event of a short Parliament. I am talking about a modest termination package to allow ex-MPs to fulfil their obligations to those staff and to adjust to life outside Parliament without any significant increase to the funds that IPSA already sets aside. This is not special pleading; it is a matter that can and will affect all parties. It is something that we must review and repair quickly, given that the fixed nature of our parliamentary terms is rather less robust than many of us had expected.

2.55 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) who is a tenacious parliamentarian. He has used the opportunity of this debate very effectively and has raised some important issues that must be considered. All Members of this House—both current and former—have an obligation and a duty to their staff.

We have seen lots of variety in this afternoon’s debate. I wish to focus on one particular issue that is incredibly important to my constituents in Corby going into this summer recess. I am talking about the Corby urgent care centre, which many colleagues will know, because I have raised it in questions on many occasions in this House. When I went back through my speaking record, I was interested to note down how many times I had raised it in different contexts.

Let me provide some background: the Corby urgent care centre was first opened in 2012 under the coalition Government with a Conservative Health Secretary—I am incredibly proud of that. It is a flagship facility, class-leading, hugely popular and a beacon of best practice. It is also the envy of many other communities across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who is in his place, would like to have exactly the sort of facility that we have in Corby at the Isebrook site in Wellingborough.

Perhaps most importantly, the biggest advantage of the Corby urgent care centre is the enormous impact that it has in relieving pressure on the A&E at Kettering general hospital, which, as we all know, has been under some strain in recent months and years. The urgent care centre makes a big difference. Let me give Members an idea of its impact. Last year, the urgent care centre in Corby saw more than 70,000 patients. Of all those who came, only 6% had to be referred to Kettering general hospital for further treatment. That shows how many people are dealt with in Corby that would otherwise have to go across to Kettering.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that such great alarm was caused by this press release issued by the clinical commissioning group. Issued on 13 July, it said:

“As has been reported previously, the contract between the Commissioners...and Lakeside +, the current provider of services at the Urgent Care Centre, expires on 30 September 2017.

In order to ensure service continuity and to safeguard the future of the centre, the Commissioners ran a competitive procurement inviting bids to continue the service for a further 12 months. Unfortunately, the only bidder in the process formally withdrew their bid yesterday and so the process has failed to generate any bidder willing to continue to provide the service.

In light of these developments, the Commissioners will be considering what options exist for the Corby Urgent Care Centre.” Interestingly, that runs completely at odds with what I was told earlier in the year by the commissioners. We have known for some time that there has been a contractual dispute between Lakeside Plus and the CCG, and we have always known that the current contract with Lakeside Plus would finish at the end of September, so there has been plenty of time to plan for this.

The earlier reply that I received on 22 March said:

“I can confirm that Corby Urgent Care Centre is not closing. The organisation running the Urgent Care Centre, Lakeside Plus, have given notice that they wish to withdraw from their contract at the end of March, but it is not their role to decide whether the service comes to an end. That decision rests with the CCG as

commissioners of healthcare for the people of Corby, and we will ensure that the service continues—with another provider if necessary. We are now working urgently to make that happen.

We have been expecting Lakeside Plus to continue the service until November, as stated in the contract notice issued by the CCG last year. We appreciate that this sudden announcement will be a cause of some disquiet for the people of Corby, who are always our primary concern. We therefore regret the alarm that is being caused by misleading suggestions that the Urgent Care Centre is to close, and would appreciate your help in putting people's minds at rest."

The statement issued last week is inconsistent with the reassurances that I was given earlier in the year. The current position is much more ambiguous, so I wrote to the commissioners on 13 July, seeking reassurance for my constituents and clarity on what the future might hold. Their reply was equally ambiguous:

"Following withdrawal of the remaining bidder for the caretaker contract, we are urgently considering the options available. It is therefore not possible at this stage for me to say exactly what services will be in place on October 1st, when the existing UCC contract expires. I realise that this does not give you the absolutely clarity you and local people are seeking, but it is very important for me to be honest with you. The CCG is facing an unprecedented situation, with a very challenging timescale and a highly restrictive legal and commercial environment.

As you know, the CCG is also looking at how the healthcare system in Corby can best meet the needs of the community. The CCG is in the process of engaging with the community on this issue."

To my mind, that is wholly unacceptable. I have written again, pressing for reassurance, seeking details about the contingency plans, which earlier this year I was assured were in place should agreement not be reached by 30 September—I was told that it was all in hand—and requesting an urgent meeting. I am currently awaiting a reply.

People in Corby and the surrounding areas are very worried about this. With the summer holidays coming, people are coming together to campaign on the issue. I am going to meet the Save Corby Urgent Care Centre campaign group, which already has a huge social media following. We are working cross-party. Tom Beattie, the Labour leader of Corby Borough Council, and I are dusting off our joint campaigning attire and getting ready to campaign together on this, as we have done a number of times on the steel issue. I am grateful to him for being so willing to work together on this, because it is relevant to all our constituents, regardless of how they vote, or indeed whether they vote at all.

One of the points that Tom raised with me was the challenge of housing growth in our area. Our health infrastructure needs to keep pace. The Corby site is very relevant in the context of the hub-and-spoke model that Kettering General hospital is trying to develop, with a new urgent care hub at Kettering General, a hub in Corby and hopefully a hub in Wellingborough.

What needs to happen? We need urgent reassurance from the commissioners that the current service will be not only protected, but further improved in the years ahead, and that the quality that we have become used to will continue. We must always review our health infrastructure, but to my mind it is unthinkable that the urgent care centre would not be a key component right at the heart of our local health infrastructure. Given that the procurement for the new contract was for only 12 months in any event, surely it cannot be beyond the wit of man to sit down with the current providers and

try to come up with an agreement—I have offered to help facilitate that process—or, failing that, to put in place the arrangements that I was previously told were available. What we need is a bit more dialogue, properly listening to local people, because local wishes are exceptionally clear on the matter. The CCG was set up to advance Corby's cause. It represents only the borough of Corby—it is the smallest CCG in the country—so I would like to think that its key focus would be on listening to local people and putting them first without having to take into account the needs of wider north Northamptonshire.

Therefore, over the summer recess I plan to be—to use a variant of a phrase—a bloody difficult man on this issue. I am going to stand up for my constituents. I really hope that the commissioners will be listening to me this afternoon and to my constituents—please do not let us down.

3.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who I am very sure could be a bloody difficult man. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on his thoughtful maiden speech.

I want to take this opportunity to raise three issues. The first is the closure of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs offices. Last week, we had a positive and upbeat debate in Westminster Hall about the future of the 30-odd new towns across the UK, but as I said then, one massive dark cloud hanging over the future of my new town—Cumbernauld—is the threatened closure of the tax office. It is not just Cumbernauld that is affected, and the situation is the same in towns across the UK. We are not talking about just trimming a small, obsolete office or two; we are looking at an extraordinary degradation in the HMRC estate, taking it from 170 offices to 13 regional centres and a network of many hubs, all with the loss of around 8,000 jobs.

Much has been said on previous occasions about why these plans are, to put it bluntly, absolutely bonkers. That includes the centralising of staff in expensive city centre accommodation, ridiculous assumptions about how far staff can travel, and the complete lack of any assessment of the effect of closing these offices on the local economy. Just prior to dissolution, the Public Accounts Committee published an excellent and comprehensive report on the subject, making not only the points I have made, but many more. Has HMRC listened? Not at all. Without addressing any of the concerns raised by the Committee, it has battered on regardless, even signing contracts for some of the new premises during the purdah period.

We need a halt to this closure programme, and we need an opportunity for this Chamber to debate the Public Accounts Committee report in full, as well as any response HMRC cares to offer. The 1,500 employees in my constituency deserve that, as do the 60,000 across the UK and the communities in which those offices are based.

The second issue I want to raise is the immigration rules relating to spouses, partners and their children. As Members will probably know from their own casework, we have among the most draconian family immigration

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

rules in the world, with an extraordinary income requirement, and ludicrously complicated rules and ridiculous restrictions on how that income requirement can be met. Over 40% of the UK population would not be entitled to live in this country with a non-EU spouse were they to marry one; in fact, in some parts, including Northern Ireland, the figure would be over 50%.

The Children's Commissioner for England wrote a damning report about the 15,000 Skype children, as she called them—there are probably more than 15,000 now—who get to see their mum and dad only via the internet, with terrible consequences for their wellbeing.

Back in February, the Supreme Court, while not striking down the rules entirely, did make it clear that applying them in certain cases, especially those involving children, could breach the right to respect for family life. A glimmer of hope perhaps? Actually, for five months, this has caused even more anguish for certain families, as the Home Office has told applicants that their cases are paused while it

“takes time to study the judgement”

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister managed to insert a commitment into the Conservative manifesto to make the rules even more draconian, increasing the financial threshold and breaking up even more families—a strange way to try to win votes.

But today—surprise, surprise—on the last day of term, the Immigration Minister has made a written statement saying that changes to the immigration rules are to be tabled to implement the Supreme Court ruling. The rules were not made available until 2 pm, when this, the final debate of the term, had started, so I have had just the briefest opportunity to look at what really are 22 pages of gobbledegook. At first glance, I am afraid it does not appear that the Government have moved very far. The treatment of these families, and indeed their elected representatives, has been totally disgraceful, and I look forward to returning to this issue after the recess.

The third and final issue I want to raise is the refugee and migration crisis. As Brexit continues to dominate the agenda, it almost seems as if we have forgotten that the search for safety from war and persecution, and for opportunities that cannot be found at home, still drives millions of people to travel to other parts of the world, in many cases towards Europe. Over 2,300 people have already drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean this year, and over 100,000 have made the crossing successfully.

The SNP will continue to argue for the provision of safe legal routes, the extension of the Dubs scheme, expanded family reunion rights, and participation in EU relocation schemes. Whatever our views, and whatever our thoughts on the best way to tackle this crisis, we can surely agree that this is one of the most pressing and urgent issues of our time, and we should debate and scrutinise the response of the Government and the EU as a whole not just now and again, but week in, week out—otherwise, talk of global Britain will be empty talk.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, all right hon. and hon. Members, and all the staff of the House as restful a recess as possible.

3.9 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Today I want to talk about how a Conservative Government with a Conservative Member of Parliament in Congleton and a Conservative-led council in Cheshire East are working together to deliver effectively for people in my constituency and the wider Cheshire East area.

Let me give as a first example this week's Government announcement on school funding. I spoke in the Christmas recess debate, on this very spot, of how the Government's proposed national funding formula would not serve well the school pupils in my constituency and the wider Cheshire East area. In January, I took a delegation of headteachers to meet the Minister for School Standards, and the leader of Cheshire East Council, Councillor Rachel Bailey, came with us. The Minister listened and asked what annual amount those headteachers considered would be needed to provide senior school students with the education they need and deserve. The answer they came back with was £4,800—exactly the amount that this week the Secretary of State for Education has confirmed will be provided by Government for our pupils. As she told me, this is a very good settlement for Cheshire. Ministers responded to our concerns, and I want to thank them, just as local headteachers have thanked me for this result, which shows a Conservative Government working with a Conservative MP and Conservative councillors to deliver for local people.

I turn now to planning matters, noting that 27 July is the date scheduled for adoption by Cheshire East of its local plan. This will come after one of the most lengthy and complex examinations in the country. It is true to say that in the past I have not held back in this place from saying that areas in my constituency have been blighted by developers keen to grab green space and agricultural sites for inappropriate development. However, now that the local plan inspector has found that a five-year housing land supply has been identified, that battleground should—and, I believe, will be—a thing of the past. This is a new day. I call on the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to uphold the inspector's view of a five-year Cheshire East housing land supply, and the terms of the local plan, together with the further several neighbourhood plans in place locally, and to reject any planning appeals to develop further greenfield or green space sites. This should now provide an effective means whereby inappropriate developments are stopped once and for all in my constituency and beyond.

I give credit to neighbourhood planning groups and town councillors such as Mike Benson in Sandbach, who have worked so hard, as I have here, to ensure that neighbourhood plans have a real impact. In Sandbach, where there is no housing need, there should now, in future, be the inference that no additional housing will be permitted other than in accordance with NDP—neighbourhood development plan—policies. Indeed, that is already happening. We need only witness the way in which the former housing Minister recently rejected a planning application for land to the rear of Park Lane and Crewe Road in Sandbach, directly on account of the need expressed in the Sandbach neighbourhood plan for an area of separation. Again, this shows a Conservative Government working together with a Conservative MP and Conservative councillors to deliver for local residents.

I turn now to the many transport improvements in the area. Let me first set the record straight once and for all: it was local Conservatives—MP and councillors—who obtained money to improve junction 17 of the M6, and not any other party or person. I know, because I was there at the very first meeting of the Highways Authority when I requested funding to prevent future accidents—in particular, for the southbound exit of the M6, which, as I clearly identified to the Highways Authority, was becoming dangerous. Action was taken and funding was provided. Similarly, a Conservative MP working with a Conservative council obtained from a Conservative-led Government £46 million for the Congleton link road—one of the highest road grants under that Government—thereby reducing congestion, reducing air pollution, and opening up employment land for new and expanding businesses. Work will start next year, with a planned completion date of 2020.

The same effective joint working resulted in £1.25 million being provided for the Middlewich eastern bypass business case. That extremely convincing business case showing wide economic and wellbeing benefits was produced by Cheshire East Council this spring. I need not go into further detail about that now, as I have spoken about it several times in this House. I am grateful to the roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) for meeting me again this week and listening so carefully as I pressed for funding from the Government towards the construction costs of approximately £56 million. That would unlock employment land for up to 2,000 jobs and support the reopening of Middlewich railway station for passengers, linking it to a Crewe hub for HS2, which, in turn, would be a springboard for wholesale economic development and connectivity across the region.

Cheshire East Council, together with the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership, is working hard to ensure that the HS2 hub is built at Crewe, but to ensure that it realises its full economic potential we need at least five trains an hour from London to Crewe. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), the Minister with responsibility for rail, is a good listener, and I am sure that he will take that on board, together with my oft-repeated request that the line to Middlewich be reopened to passengers. I thank him for agreeing to meet me and representatives from the mid Cheshire rail link campaign about the matter.

Ease of transport is essential for people's wellbeing, and so Government funding has been provided to improve Cheshire East's roads. No less than £92 million has been invested over the past five years to improve them radically, and they are now among the best in the country. On Monday 24 July, £1 million-worth of improvements in and around the pedestrianised areas of Congleton town centre will begin. Local councillors are delighted that Congleton has two new minibuses after obtaining £50,000 of national funding from the Department for Transport. A Conservative Government, working with a Conservative MP and Conservative councils at both county and town level, are delivering for our residents in real and tangible ways to improve their quality of life.

I finish by thanking the Government for the funding given to our local schools, most recently £1.7 million for improvements at Eaton Bank Academy and more than £100,000 to refurbish Havannah Primary School. Our

schools merit this; 96.2% of them are good or outstanding, and they are in one of the top 20 authorities nationally. A Conservative Government are supporting well a Conservative MP and a Conservative council, working for the real-life benefit of residents.

3.16 pm

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): As this is the first time that I have spoken when you have been in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I congratulate you on your election and wish you well in your new role? I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) on her appointment as the shadow Deputy Leader of the House. It is always an honour to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is a fantastic advocate for her constituency, as she proved by what she said today. I should also thank my new hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who is not in his place at the moment but who made an excellent maiden speech. I think he will be a very caring and determined Member for the people of Reading East.

I want to talk first of all about the soft drinks industry levy that the Government plan to introduce, which is better known as the sugar tax. I have great reservations about the tax, and I believe that my concerns are not unfounded. In his Budget statement earlier this year, the Chancellor admitted that the estimated amount of income from the levy would be half that which was originally predicted. The Chancellor acknowledged the excellent work being done by the soft drinks industry to combat the level of sugar in soft drinks.

In other countries where such a tax has been introduced, such as France, the US and Mexico, the impact has been minimal. In this country, the tax is badly targeted; some of the most sugary drinks, such as milk-based and yoghurt-based drinks, as well as fruit juices, have been excluded. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that consumers may even substitute some of those other products to get their fix of sugar. The levy does nothing to help to educate consumers on reducing sugar in their diets.

I commend the soft drinks industry—I do not have a soft drinks factory or anything like that in my constituency, but I feel it is important to say this—for the work that it has done so far to address the sugar content of soft drinks. In 2015, it was the only sector in the food and drink industry that had an ambitious plan to reduce calorie intake from its products by 20% by 2020. The sector has been particularly proactive in reducing the sugar consumed in its products through reformulation, promoting diet versions of drinks and smaller portion sizes—actions that have been acknowledged by Public Health England. More than 60% of drinks now have reduced or even zero calorie content.

Independent analysis shows that the levy will lead to more than 4,000 job losses across the UK and a decline of £132 million in the UK economy, predominantly in retail and hospitality, including pubs and corner shops. Although this is planned to be a long-term tax, it is massively unstable and the IFS expects that, by 2021, because of general consumption trends and the work done by manufacturers to reduce sugar in their drinks, there will be a huge black hole in the funding of school health improvement initiatives and sports dependent on income from the levy.

[*Mary Glindon*]

The McKinsey report on tackling obesity ranked a sugar tax as 12th of the 16 least effective options in tackling obesity. If the Government are serious about their child obesity plan, they must find a more certain and secure form of funding for the many activities it needs to support, rather than the ever-decreasing levy.

There are other ways to tackle obesity. I would like the Government to consider the review of the research on the impact of milk on children's development carried out by Northumbria University, which suggested that milk consumption generally improves children's nutritional status. Children who regularly drink milk have lower body mass indices, lower body fat percentage and lower waist circumferences than children who rarely drink it.

In a Westminster Hall debate earlier this year, I asked the then Education Minister if the review of the standards of the child obesity plan, which is due in September, could include a commitment that children will be guaranteed access to milk in school at least once a day. I ask for that commitment again today.

On a separate issue, I want to refer to four early-day motions that I tabled immediately after the Queen's Speech to draw attention to issues raised by the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party parliamentary group, which I co-chair. EDM 20 called for the Government to publish their long-overdue drugs strategy, and I am pleased to say that they have finally obliged. Regrettably, however, they have yet to act on EDM 22, which focuses on the funding crisis faced by the drug and alcohol treatment sector. Consequently, they risk undermining the delivery of their new strategy. The strategy gives scant regard to alcohol misuse. Ministers should correct that by following the advice of EDM 18 to publish a bespoke alcohol strategy that protects and promotes treatment services and introduces minimum unit pricing.

Lastly, EDM 21 draws attention to hepatitis C, which is now completely curable, and calls on the Government to publish a strategy to help meet the World Health Organisation target of eliminating hepatitis by 2030. Perhaps Ministers will reflect on that next Friday 28 July, which is World Hepatitis Day.

I will finish by wishing everyone a wonderful recess. I hope we all get some rest, even though we will be quite busy I should imagine.

3.22 pm

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the pop and fizz of the soft drinks speech by the hon. Member for North Tyneside (*Mary Glindon*), although I do urge caution. As a type 2 diabetic, I am sympathetic to not having too many sugary drinks, but there are lots of evils in those soft drinks that do not have sugar in them. When walking around my local Asda or another supermarket, I note the paradox that it is still possible to buy fizzy drinks cheaply, despite what the hon. Lady said.

I want to thank not only the staff of the House but all the personal staff in our offices, who do so much work. I have been immensely fortunate in my nearly 13 years in the House to have recruited an exceptional individual, Lucy Paton-Brown, who is sadly leaving me in September. She has done a fabulous job for me. I am particularly conscious that for one year a few years ago

I was either in hospital or in bed at home, unable to do my job properly. Usually when that happens, a neighbouring Member of Parliament takes over the constituency burden and casework while the Member recuperates. Lucy managed to do all that work for nearly a year on my behalf. She will be sorely missed.

I want to talk about some campaigns in Southend. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) mentioned the very good news that clinicians have decided that, under the strategic transformation programme for the local hospital, blue-light ambulance services will continue to be directed to local hospitals in Southend, Chelmsford and Basildon to receive the best immediate care. The election came in the middle of a big consultation on the matter, but political campaigners who were more interested in garnering votes than the quality of our local health service used A&E scurrilously.

We were told locally that Southend hospital would close, then that A&E would close, then that A&E would be downgraded and then that there would be nothing more than a nurse with a first aid box. My hon. Friends the Members for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and others reassured the public, but that message did not entirely get through and lies dominated the campaign.

Some key organisers in the campaign perpetuated the lies. I feel for Opposition Members who have to put up with some of the more disreputable elements of Momentum. Many decent, honest people were involved in the Save Southend A&E campaign, but it was misused by Momentum, which was aggressive and tried to intimidate. There was a public meeting outside my house, with someone using a loudhailer, to try to intimidate me—the tweets asking people to go there specified that—into backing down from saying that all decisions should be clinically led. The circumstances were appalling. I am sorry for Opposition Members because sometimes the wrath that leads to “red on red” is even fiercer than that which causes “red on blue”.

I want to talk about a train. I will not go all “Thomas the Tank Engine” on hon. Members, but all trains should be like the 7.18 from Shoeburyness to Fenchurch Street, travelling from the sea to the city in under 60 minutes. It gets in after 58 minutes. If it did not stop, the journey could be made in 32 minutes. That would transform the local economy.

When I was first elected in 2005, Southend airport covered one destination and had 40,000 passengers. It now has 30 destinations and 1.2 million passenger movements, which will increase to 2.5 million in 2018, with more than 40 destinations worldwide. That will regenerate the area. We need to do more to work with the surrounding community and business parks to get businesses around the airport.

Time is short, so I thank everybody for brevity in the debate and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your early days in the Chair.

3.27 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) has taken her rightful place on the Front Bench. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on his maiden speech.

He spoke with great sincerity and knowledge about his constituency and the challenges facing it, particularly pressure on housing and public services.

I wish to raise just one subject—leasehold—which affects not only a number of my constituents, but many other people throughout England and Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) has already touched on it. I spoke about it in the Chamber last December, when I described the emerging leasehold scandal as the PPI of the house building industry. However, having seen more of the serial failures, deceptions and obfuscations, I believe I may have understated culpability right across the board. The developers, of course, are public enemy No. 1, but the lenders, the solicitors and even the Government all have to take some share of the blame for a scandal that has the potential to fundamentally destabilise the housing market if it is not tackled soon.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said, I am now vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, which he brilliantly chairs alongside the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). They have been superbly assisted by the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership in bringing the matter to the attention of parliamentarians. There now seems to be some consensus across the House that these abuses need to be tackled. I understand that the Government will be coming forward shortly with plans to tackle some of the abuses in the leasehold sector, but it is vital that they create not only a clear and fair framework for new builds, but a strategy to deal with the rotten mess that developers have created.

There at last appears to be some self-awareness by developers that leasehold homes are becoming toxic, with many now pledging voluntarily not to sell any new homes on a leasehold basis. But that will not assist my constituents who have already bought their homes and have been quoted extortionate sums to buy their properties, obtain permission to alter the property, or even ask a question of their landlord, nor will it assist the many who are already trapped because they have onerous leases that purchasers are no longer interested in signing up to, and that some building societies will no longer lend on. It will also not assist us in holding to account the guilty men and women who must have known that creating this second lucrative income stream for developers would ultimately be at the cost of their customers.

Developers are beginning to acknowledge their responsibility. Taylor Wimpey voluntarily announced in April that it was going to set up a process whereby those with the most onerous leases had the opportunity to convert them into new leases where the ground rent would increase by only RPI, instead of doubling every 10 years. Sadly, however, that announcement is where the credit stops, because three months on, progress has been painfully slow. In the intervening period, I have been contacted by at least one constituent whose ground rent has doubled since the announcement was made, which means that if it ever does get converted to an RPI lease, those RPI increases will be applied to a ground rent that is twice what it could have been. This has ongoing consequences should my constituent ever be in a position to purchase the freehold outright, and if she does try to purchase it, she will still have to negotiate

with the owner of the freehold, whoever that is, and navigate the fiendishly complicated and lengthy process currently in place.

The lease may still contain other punitive clauses aside from the ground rent, which, as we have seen from some examples, can include charges of up to £3,000 just to get permission for an extension. This is all before we consider those who are not covered, such as second-generation purchasers where Taylor Wimpey are not the freehold owners. Where do they stand? There is going to need to be an active Government strategy to deal with everyone affected by this scandal.

The Government have a financial interest in sorting this out. At the end of March 2017 the number of Help to Buy purchases on leasehold properties stood at just over 28,000, of which 11,641 are houses. Some 23% of all Help to Buy purchases are on leasehold properties, and given concerns about the drop in value of some of the properties with the most onerous leases, there is a real question whether the Government will get all their money back eventually. To my astonishment, there has not yet been any suggestion of an outright ban on Help to Buy funds being used to purchase leasehold houses.

Let us be clear: sorting out the immediate consequences of onerous leases must be the start of the process, not the end of it. We need to learn the lessons, and if necessary legislate, so that the worst excesses of capitalism that we have seen here are not allowed to infect our society again. There needs to be a much easier, quicker and cost-effective way, so that people can purchase their freehold outright, and then we need to bring in an outright ban on houses being sold on a leasehold basis.

But there also needs to be a long, hard look at how we got into this position in the first place. I would like there to be a full Select Committee inquiry into how this practice developed. At the moment, we do not even know the extent of it. Developers must be required to give evidence about why this systematic duping of their customers was allowed to start in the first place. Who were the authors of those leases that now nobody will sign up to? How many properties were made leasehold needlessly? How much profit have they made out of this scam? And who exactly are the beneficiaries of the leases now?

These properties are being passed around from one company to another. Some are based outside this country, and there is secrecy about who the ultimate recipients are of the substantial incomes coming from the leases. There is an old saying that an Englishman's home is his castle, but it now seems that an Englishman's home is in fact a revenue stream for an offshore company operating from a tax haven.

What is very clear to me is that when people bought their houses they thought they were doing just that—buying a home. What they never contemplated for a moment was that actually the true owner of their home would be someone they might never know the identity of, who can sell on their interest in the property to somebody else without their knowledge or consent. It sounds like something out of feudal society, not 21st-century Britain.

That brings me to what I would like a Select Committee inquiry to look at: the legal profession. Speaking as a former solicitor, I know that mistakes are made, but it seems incredible to me that so many people make the same complaint about the advice they received at the

[Justin Madders]

time of their purchase. I surveyed my constituents in leasehold properties and a staggering 80% of them did not know the true nature of what they were buying. I think those figures demonstrate that there is a compelling need for further examination of the advice that was provided. I have heard of developers offering incentives to use particular solicitors. Why would they do that, and what led to such a collective failure in the legal profession?

What advice was given to the lenders, whom solicitors also have a duty to? We now know, for example, that Nationwide will no longer lend on properties with doubling ground rents. That rather raises the question of what their and other lenders' exposure is and, crucially, why they granted mortgages on these properties in the first place. None of the developers will tell us how many properties they have built with these onerous clauses attached. We need to know the scale of the problem; the stability of the housing market rests on the back of that.

I hope I have demonstrated the range of issues that need to be dealt with in respect of this scandal. A full Select Committee inquiry is the way ahead. This has not happened by accident and we need to know why it started.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, all other Members and, in particular, all the staff who work so hard to keep this place running smoothly, a restful and peaceful summer.

3.35 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): We have had some excellent speeches, including a great maiden speech from the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda). I was at university in Reading, and I spent a lot of time drinking pints in The Nob, going to the kebab shop and eating Champ's burgers. I studied chemistry and food science, and I think I took the food part a bit too literally. We have also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who raised the issue of BBC salaries. Earlier today, my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) talked about Derek Thompson's salary. Doctor Who is now a woman. It is only in the world of the BBC that a nurse gets paid more than a doctor. But I am not going to talk about the fictional hospital in "Holby City". I want to talk about a real hospital: my local hospital, St Helier.

Just before the election, I brought the Secretary of State for Health to St Helier. I was pleased that he took me up on my invitation to come to see the best and the worst of the hospital. He saw that we have the best A&E in London in terms of achieving its targets. He saw the fantastic work of the staff there, and the award-winning fracture unit. He also saw how the multi-disciplinary patient reviews are setting a really good example for other hospitals.

However, the Secretary of State also saw the hoarding around the back of the building, which is crumbling. The hoarding is there not because of construction work but because we cannot rely on bits of masonry not falling off. When a building has the ability to make people more ill, that is not a good thing. There is a fantastic renal unit at St Helier, but the area with the

sickest patients is dysfunctional because the lifts do not work properly. A modern-day hospital bed does not fit inside the lifts, so the trust is paying something like £10,000 a week for ambulances to move people from the back of the hospital to the front. This is a building that predates antibiotics, and it will never be what most people would think of as a modern-day healthcare facility. We really need to find a solution to this.

I am delighted that a solution is starting to present itself. We have had review after review, but now, for the first time, the trust has been allowed to engage with the public on an option that does not include St George's in Tooting. There are six MPs whose constituents are served by the St Helier and Epsom hospitals and they disagree on a lot of the detail, but they do agree that people needing A&E or maternity services should not have to go to Tooting. St George's is already overloaded, and it is also incredibly difficult to get there in the rush hour as it involves heading into London. The option is to build a specialist acute unit on one of the three sites that the trust owns. It could be at St Helier or at Epsom, or it could be a co-located site involving the Royal Marsden, which could add extra benefits to the services provided there.

Apart from reacquainting myself with the family and trying to get a bit of rest, I will be spending the summer back out on the stump speaking to as many people as possible, because what we need at this stage is for people around Sutton to be asking the NHS to support the trust's vision and saying, "Yes, we want that level of investment." The work will cost between £300 million and £400 million. Trying to extract that sort of money is not easy, but we have to find the local will to start talking about where to locate the specialist acute facility and about how to get the money, which could come from the Treasury or from loans, or we could leverage money from pension funds. My local council's pension fund invests in at least three shopping centres, so why not invest that money in local infrastructure? However expensive the project might be, I think we can all discount PFIs, which have been discredited over the past few years.

In engaging with the public, the trust has ruled little out, but what it has ruled out is really significant: it has ruled out closing St Helier hospital. We have had lots of campaigns to save St Helier, but its closure has been ruled out. The trust is spending £12 million on refurbishing the back of the building, and it has applied for grants to get more money. The trust has asked for about £80 million to cover costs, £40 million of which—if secured—will help to keep St Helier open for at least another 20 years. That has to be good news for the people of Sutton.

The trust has also ruled out doing nothing. I have said that the building is crumbling and that it cannot be turned into a modern facility, so I know that the trust will do what it can to make the hospital last, but we have to do something for my constituents, for the boroughs of Sutton and Merton and for the surrounding areas. The trust has also ruled out building on the land that it solely owns on the old Sutton hospital site in Belmont, because it is too small. That is why the trust is looking at co-locating with the Royal Marsden hospital, the benefit of which is that extra facilities will be added for the Royal Marsden, which does superb work in cancer treatment—having an acute facility right on the doorstep will be good news.

In conclusion, I will be going around speaking to as many people as I can, and I hope the constituents will look at my website, come and speak to me and really get involved. By the time we get back after the conferences, we will hopefully have completed the first stage of getting new healthcare facilities in Sutton. Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you and everybody else a very restful summer break.

3.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in these Adjournment debates, and I look forward to each one. People say that I always speak in Adjournment debates, but there you are. In the past, I have taken this opportunity to talk about Northern Ireland's history and culture, and it is important to get that in *Hansard*. I have spoken about the Apprentice Boys and the Orange Order, but today I want to speak about the Royal Black Preceptory. People will know about 12 July, which is a bank and public holiday in Northern Ireland. It is a celebration of our culture, history and heritage and, for people who may not be aware, it is important to those who wear a collarette and walk down a certain street. I want to speak about why members of the Royal Black Preceptory put on their collarettes and hold their head high and walk at parades in the so-called marching season.

The Royal Black Preceptory, or the Institute of the Imperial Grand Black Chapter of the British Commonwealth, was formed in Ireland in 1797, two years after the formation of the Orange Order in Daniel Winter's cottage, Loughgall, County Armagh. Its headquarters remain in Lurgan, County Armagh. It ran on an informal basis until 14 September 1846, when the Royal Black Institution was placed on a permanent basis through its reconstitution at a meeting held in Portadown.

From that point, the institution was infused with new life, vitality, inspiration, discipline and a foundation, which has helped it to stand the test of time and to expand to the worldwide membership that exists today. The tiered structure of the institution has its foundation in the local preceptory. Each preceptory has a unique number, which is allocated by the governing body when a new warrant is issued. The preceptory elects officers, who represent their membership at the next tier, namely, a district chapter. Officers from the various local district chapters come together and form a county or provincial grand chapter. My Royal Black Preceptory is number 675, Ballywalter Crimson Arrow. I have been a master and a district master and am currently the register.

The officers of the various county or provincial chapters constitute the membership of the governing body known as the Imperial Grand Council. One of the institution's most colourful and well-attended events is the annual demonstration at Scarva in County Down, which is traditionally held on 13 July. Preceptories from Portadown, Newry, Tandragee, Markethill, Banbridge, Rathfriland and Lower Iveagh take part along with many national and international visitors.

Exceptional numbers of people turned out this year. I believe that across the whole Province there has been more interest in our culture and history this summer than ever before. The numbers who attended and took part in the demonstrations or parades have been phenomenally larger than normal.

Other demonstrations attended by the majority of preceptories in Northern Ireland are organised on the last Saturday in August each year, usually across six different venues. A demonstration is also organised for the second Saturday in August in Fermanagh, attended by preceptories from Fermanagh, Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. There is also one in Scotland, attended by all Scottish preceptories.

I will quote the official website of the Royal Black Institution:

"At the beginning of the 21st century, the Royal Black Institution is poised to continue its valuable role in maintaining its witness for the Christian Reformed Faith and fostering friendly relations among people of a common heritage on what is truly a worldwide scale."

The basis of the Royal Black Institution is the promotion of scripture, the principles of the Protestant Reformation, and religious freedom, democracy and liberty for all. The Royal Black Institution has preceptories throughout the world, mainly in the major English-speaking countries, and is particularly strong in Newfoundland, Canada. The society is also popular in Scotland—I see that some of my colleagues from Scotland are here today—where 60 preceptories exist, organised into 11 districts across the country. In Glasgow alone, 26 marches by the Royal Black Institution took place in the year 2009-10.

We walk on the last Saturday in August. This year, the demonstration will be held in Comber, which is in my constituency, for the whole of County Down. For those who love marching bands, the preceptories demonstration always brings an exceptional quality of bands. The Royal Black Preceptory members are well turned out, in suits, ties and in some cases bowler hats.

The society is formed from Orangemen and can be seen as a progression of that order, although they are separate institutions. Anyone wishing to be admitted to the Royal Black Institution must first become a member of an Orange Order Lodge, and many people are members of both. The Royal Black is often referred to as "the senior of the loyal orders".

The Black's foundations are scriptural and it does not involve itself in politics or take "political" stances that sway towards one particular political party or another, while the Orange Order has traditionally been seen to play a more prominent role in Unionist politics. When people talk about "political rallies", that is why many Black preceptory members do not associate with such rallies.

I am a proud member of the Royal Black Preceptory 675, along with my brother Keith, and I walk proudly, understanding that when I walk I carry with me the weight and history of our nation. The fact is that the underlying principle of the Black is religious freedom, which I greatly appreciate and often speak about in this House. It means a lot to me and to all the other people whose fathers and grandfathers have proudly stood under the scriptural banners of the lodges. Although there may be some on either side of the divide who seek to make such walks a political action, as a politician I can proudly say that that is not my purpose when wearing my collarette. My purpose is to declare that I hold to the tenet of religious liberty for all, and cling to the right to express and celebrate my heritage and culture as a man who loves God, loves scripture, loves his community, loves culture and loves our marching season.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I will give a note to anyone in this House—right hon. Members or hon. Members—who invites me to any events on 12 July or the Black Saturday. For some reason, I will not be available. On those two occasions back home, I have a long-standing engagement of celebrating who I am. Although I really appreciate such invitations, I am sorry that I will not be able to take them up.

I thank Mr Deputy Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, and the staff of this House, for their kindness to all of us as right hon. and hon. Members, including the catering staff, the security staff and especially *Hansard*, who often translate my Ulster Scots into English, which I appreciate very much; *Hansard* does very well. I wish all right hon. and hon. Members a very relaxing and peaceful holiday. They deserve the break. What a privilege it is to come to this House to represent our constituents. We are very privileged to do so and I thank the people of Strangford for giving me the chance to do that again.

3.48 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow all the hon. Members, on both sides of the House, who have expressed their passion and commitment to their constituencies today. As a new Member of this House, who has been here for only a few weeks, may I also express my thanks for the kindness and advice that everyone has offered me. Members from all parties and the staff, particularly in the Lobby but also elsewhere, have helped me. Every time I look a bit lost, someone comes to my aid and directs me to the Tea Room. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all so much.

Before we go into recess, I know that some Members may be thinking about deck-chairs and warm prosecco, but I will not. Those pleasures will have to wait, because in Redditch my constituents are working, thanks to the record low levels of unemployment, which are now at a 42-year low. That means people in Redditch are working hard.

I pay tribute to our fantastic entrepreneurs in Redditch. I have made it my priority to back small businesses, and I have already visited two in my constituency—Ubi-Tech and Heartbeat—that are creating jobs at a record rate, which I welcome. We have seen unemployment in Redditch fall to a low of 2.1%, which is lower than the national average. That is fantastic news for all the residents who are taking advantage of opportunities to progress themselves and fulfil their potential.

I want to go further. I want to help everybody in Redditch who wants to get on in life, so I will be launching my Redditch mentor scheme over the summer recess. The scheme will be an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to work in schools and colleges to further young people's skills and raise their aspirations, and I am pleased to have already had some support from local businesses.

Young people sometimes face barriers to getting on in life, and we all need to do more. We talk a lot about mental health in this House, and I support and applaud those efforts, but we know we need to do more on the ground. I am also making it a focus to visit the wonderful organisations in Redditch that work so hard to help the

vulnerable people in our communities, notably: the Where Next Association, a charity that works with young people and older members of society with learning disabilities; Victim Support; Boys2Men; and the Sandycroft Centre. They are doing fantastic work on the ground, and I look forward to helping them join those efforts together so that everyone in our society can take advantage of the opportunities on offer.

We have seen our economy creating jobs at a record rate, and we have seen what happens when the economy does not work for everyone. We see youth unemployment across the rest of Europe spiralling out of control and blighting lives, so I welcome our Government's work to keep youth unemployment down, which helps all young people get a good start in life.

As other colleagues have said, fake news has sometimes blighted our election campaigns—the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) also alluded to this point. During the election, I struggled with a campaign to save the Alexandra, our local hospital. In truth, the Alex has never needed saving. The Alex is a fantastic hospital, and it was a very difficult issue for us to address in the election campaign. I call on everyone to stop using the national health service as a means to gather votes, because it does not help the hard-working doctors and nurses who have to deliver health services for patients in Redditch. It does not help them to address the issues that they are tackling admirably.

I thank the Secretary of State for Health and his Department, which yesterday announced that it would support our health services in Redditch and across Worcestershire by investing £29 million. That will help our hospital in Redditch to proceed with and deliver the results of the consultation that the clinical commissioning group decided on. I, like many others, was not happy with the consultation, which went against the wishes of Redditch people but continued for five years. There was so much uncertainty hanging over the people of Redditch that we now need to move on. We need to see the new services and investment delivered into our hospitals, which will ultimately see better care and better treatments for people in Redditch.

Finally, I say to all the EU citizens working in our national health service in Redditch, “You are welcome here, and we value the work that you do in treating our citizens in Redditch. We know you will be able to stay in this country after we leave the EU. We want you to feel welcome. We know that only 5% of NHS workers are from the EU, but you make a very significant contribution, so thank you for all the work you do.”

I wish everyone a very peaceful recess.

3.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the new Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for an eloquent and informative maiden speech.

The issue I want to talk about is the Government's consultation on “Driving offences and penalties relating to causing death or serious injury” by dangerous driving. The consultation began in December 2016 and concluded on 1 February 2017. This year's snap election has resulted in many casualties, one way or another, and it would seem that this consultation is yet another. In response to a written question I tabled on 21 June 2017, asking

when the Ministry of Justice planned to publish its response to the consultation, I received the following reply:

“The government is now considering the consultation responses. Any announcement will be made in due course.”

Dissatisfied with that response, I raised the issue at business questions last week. The Leader of the House appeared to share my concern and promised to write to me, but as yet I have not received a letter—I am sure it will arrive at my office soon.

I raise this issue because of the tragic death of my constituent Joseph Brown-Lartey in November 2014. Joseph was killed, at the age of just 25, by a 19-year-old uninsured, unlicensed driver in a hire car who ran a red light at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone. He hit Joseph’s car. The impact was so great that the car was cut in two and Joseph was killed instantly. Just the previous day, that driver had posted a picture on Snapchat of his speedometer at 142 mph on the M62, with a boast that he had driven from Leeds to Rochdale in just 11 minutes. He was sentenced to just six years’ imprisonment, of which he is likely to serve three. He will very probably soon be released, but Joseph’s family are serving a life sentence with the loss of their beloved son.

I wrote to the Attorney General on behalf of Joseph’s family, asking for this sentence to be reconsidered, but the ruling was that it was in line with current guidelines and was therefore not considered to be “unduly lenient”. It is the belief of Joseph’s parents and myself, and many other affected families, that these guidelines are outdated and that the penalty does not match the severity of the crimes committed by dangerous drivers. The maximum sentence is 14 years, yet it is very rare that even this maximum sentence is imposed. Joseph’s parents, Dawn and Ian, have campaigned tirelessly under their “Justice for Joseph” campaign, championed by local radio station Key 103, to try to ensure that other families do not suffer the same sense of burning injustice that they have. They have handed in a petition, signed by more than 20,000 people, to 10 Downing Street, calling for tougher sentences for dangerous drivers. They have given the wreckage of Joseph’s car to Greater Manchester police, and it is being used to educate drivers, particularly young drivers, about the dangers of driving dangerously. Members may have seen the car outside Parliament in July last year and may, rightly, have been shocked to see it split completely in two. The road safety charity, Brake has given its full support to the campaign and has launched its own parallel campaign, “Roads to Justice”. Gary Rae, from Brake, has said:

“There are too many families who suffer the double trauma of losing a loved one in a sudden and violent way and then witness the judicial system turning its back on them.”

There was relief when the Government finally announced in December last year that a consultation was to be held, with the possibility of life sentences for those causing death or serious injury by dangerous driving. However, it is now July 2017, we are about to go into recess and still there is no sign of the outcome of the consultation. In the meantime, many families sadly have been and continue to be affected by this gross injustice.

At the launch of the “Roads to Justice” campaign, I met a constituent of the Prime Minister, Mark Hollands’ daughter Bryony was tragically killed by a drunk driver who came off the road and struck her while she was

walking along the pavement. Bryony’s killer was given an eight-year sentence, of which he will serve four. Bryony was a 19-year-old music student. Since her death, her father has campaigned tirelessly for tougher sentences and raised funds for the music therapy charity Nordoff Robbins, in his daughter’s memory. Bryony’s father contacted me today to say that the family should have been attending her graduation ceremony in Sheffield this very afternoon.

In Aldershot in November last year, two young runners, Lucy Pygott and Stacey Burrows, were killed by a drunk driver while out training. Their killer, a soldier, got just six years, of which he will serve three. As Lucy’s mother said:

“The British Army trains soldiers to kill—this man killed with his loaded weapon of a hot-hatch car.”

Sadly, the list goes on and on. I recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Justice to ask for information on the progress of the consultation, and I highlighted two more cases. One was in Oldham; two young girls aged 11 and 12 were killed, yet the driver, who fled the scene, received a sentence of just four years, of which he will serve two. One was in St Helens in May this year; a four-year-old was killed and her grandmother seriously injured by the driver of a stolen car that mounted the pavement at speed, with the driver also fleeing the scene. When he was finally arrested and charged, he received a sentence of nine years, of which he will serve four and a half.

While the Government delay, the families who lose loved ones in such horrific and entirely avoidable circumstances should not be made to suffer the added injustice of such lenient treatment of the killers. I am keen for the Government to make clear their intentions as soon as possible, for the sake of the victims and their families, who have suffered enough. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to raise this hugely important matter today.

4.1 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), not only for that moving speech, but for showing a lot of fight on behalf of the victims in those terrible cases. I pay tribute to her campaign for justice, which I hope she continues with; we will all support her in that endeavour.

I wish to raise the case of a constituent, Mr Chris Francis of Constable Road in Sudbury. He contacted me almost a year ago today to express his concerns about a large metal barrier that had been erected across the garden gate at the rear of his property. When I first heard about it, I thought it was perhaps just another constituency case, but he explained that he is blind and used the gate to safely and easily access his property with his guide dog, Nimbus. Central to his concern about the barrier was the fact that he would no longer be able to use his back door as an exit in an emergency—I emphasise that we are talking about an emergency. Mr Francis was not notified or consulted by Calibre Homes, the company that erected the barrier.

I went out to Constable Road to see the houses, all ex-council houses that back on to an estate called Suffolk Court. The company that manages the estate had erected the barriers outside rear gates that had been

[*James Cartlidge*]

used for many years. Suddenly, the residents of these houses woke up to find that they could not open or close them. The barriers were covered in anti-burglar paint, they were ugly and, in my view, the way they had been built was aggressive.

In November, I went back to see Mr Francis to update him on the progress of his case, or lack of it. I had been telling Babergh District Council that I thought the residents had a right of way, and asked the council to help me to prove that; the council was going through the inevitably slow legal process of doing so. When I went to see Mr Francis in November, I was shocked to discover that he had suffered a severe stroke—a right-sided total anterior circulation infarct. Mr Francis is 62 and, as I said, blind. He is a Royal Air Force veteran: he was a parachuting instructor in the RAF for 10 years. He then set up his own parachute school. He was a very active man and has lived a brilliant life.

When I saw him that day, he was in a most distressing state. His sister, Anne, who has been a stalwart by his side, explained to me the circumstances of his stroke. She came to Mr Francis's property to find that he had collapsed at the front door. She could not go through the front door because his key was in it, so immediately called the ambulance service, which tried to access the house from the rear.

The report states that

“the delay in getting into the property was due to a tall metal fence, which obstructed their ability to get through to the back of the property. It was in fact so high it was unsafe for them to climb over to gain entry. Therefore, they requested the attendance of the Police to gain access.”

The police report states:

“There was no safe entry point to the front of the property as the male had collapsed by the front door. Efforts to get to the rear of the property to assess an entry point were severely hampered by the large fencing. I was eventually able to scale it after using a wheelie bin to get some extra height. Not all officers would have been able to do this...In relation to delay, I would say the fencing added about 10 minutes to police gaining entry...This would have removed a delay of medical attention by about 30 minutes as Ambulance on arrival would have been able to go straight into the property.”

In other words, if the barrier had not been there, there would have been an extra 30 minutes for an ambulance to attend to this man suffering a stroke. Everyone in the Chamber will know that the NHS has an acronym for treating stroke, and that is FAST, because the speed of treatment is critical. My constituent suffers from significantly reduced mobility, speech and wellbeing. He relies on considerable assistance from his sister and family and requires a wheelchair.

My main reason for raising this case is that I believe that Calibre Homes—I have corresponded with the company and it has shown no willingness to remove the barriers, has been unable to justify them and, in my view, has been most aggressive—has in effect contributed to the severity of the stroke suffered by my constituent, a blind veteran. That is absolutely shocking. In fact, it has continued with that rather belligerent attitude. Anne Francis, the sister of my constituent, has been in communication with Calibre Homes, pleading for the removal of the fence to help him have a better quality of

life. Indeed, the Suffolk County Council occupational therapist has reported on access possibilities, stating that

“the front wheelchair access is not practical in part due to the shared porch and part the gradient required...I would think they have a strong case if disability is the issue, and the rear is the only wheelchair access”.

Mr Francis requires an electric wheelchair that needs to be housed outside but requires rear access. We have asked Calibre Homes, which has refused to grant this permission or remove the fence.

I ask Members to bear in mind that, in my view, that barrier is unjustified because those residents have a right of way. They had been walking out of the back of their homes for donkey's years and suddenly they woke up to find these things straight out of an American penitentiary centre stuck in the concrete at the back of their houses, covered in burglar paint. It is absolutely reprehensible.

I want to finish with a point about Calibre Homes. I have been in correspondence with the company. It is aggressive in the way that it writes, it could not care less about my constituent and it has shown not a shred of humanity or compassion for someone who is suffering severely and has served this country. I wish Mr Francis well in his recovery, I will work with Babergh District Council to try to prove the right of way for those residents and I will fight his corner. He is vulnerable and needs me to do that. I will fight for him and my constituents against this company, which has no scruples.

4.7 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) about the warm welcome that has been extended to new Members. I pay particular tribute to our staff in the SNP Whips Office, who have supported me in my meteoric rise to deputy assistant junior Whip.

I want to mention the proposed closures of Parkhead and Easterhouse jobcentres within my Glasgow East constituency. These proposed closures are ill-thought-out and will have a deeply damaging impact on some of the most vulnerable communities in Glasgow's east end where access to transport and digital connectivity are major barriers. Ministers on the Treasury Bench would do well to come to Glasgow and see for themselves the havoc that these proposals would cause to an already fragile community. My main subject today is a difficult and deeply upsetting one. I must confess, I even thought twice about whether to speak about it at all, but it is incumbent on me to speak up because those who I want to speak for cannot speak up for themselves. They are the children and babies with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions, children who never live long enough to go to nursery or school.

Many right hon. and hon. Members will have experienced the joy of becoming a parent. Most, if they are lucky, will have a trouble-free pregnancy and a safe delivery. Some of us have gone through a difficult pregnancy, and the child is born prematurely or in dangerous circumstances. My own son Isaac was born prematurely and spent the first two weeks of his life in an intensive care and special care unit. We are indebted to the staff at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde for all of the care, love and support they provided to him during that time.

Isaac eventually left hospital, and he is a happy, if cheeky, little boy. However, on or before birth, some parents have to face the sobering, tragic reality that they will outlive their children, which is utterly unimaginable, yet, sadly, a reality for the families of approximately 50,000 children on these islands.

In preparing for this debate, I was incredibly grateful to my constituent and friend, Louise Gillan from Springboig, who shared with me her personal experience of having a child with complex health needs. Her daughter, Erin, was diagnosed with a rare condition at the age of two.

Across the UK, there is a mixed picture when it comes to the funding of children's palliative care. Together for Short Lives quite rightly wants the UK Government to follow the lead of the Scottish Government, who have allocated £30 million over five years to children's hospices, so that there is parity of funding with adult hospices. Children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland deserve the same recognition, opportunity and support as those in Scotland.

At this juncture, I want to pay tribute to the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for speaking so personally and movingly about their own experiences of being bereaved of a child. The hon. Gentleman did excellent work in the last Parliament to build interest and momentum around the concept of parental bereavement leave, which both Labour and the Conservatives included in their election manifestos. I am pleased that, in the past 24 hours, the Government have committed to introducing bereavement leave and supporting the private Member's Bill of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

The main issue I want to raise today is the cruel anomaly of not paying the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance for children under three years old. This has been dubbed the baby benefit bar. Children under three with life-shortening conditions often depend on ventilators and large equipment to stay alive. Some babies and children have permanent wheelchairs, as they are not able to use buggies suitable for well children of the same age. The wheelchairs are heavy because of the equipment needed to secure them to a vehicle.

All this leads me to conclude that exclusion from the mobility component of DLA is as inherently unfair as it is illogical. Calling on the UK Government to include the under threes in the mobility component of DLA is a small ask, but it is one that could enormously support and transform the lives of the families of children with short lives. These additional mobility needs are already recognised in other areas of Government policy. Children under three who depend on bulky medical equipment, or need to be near their vehicle in case they need emergency medical treatment, are already eligible for a blue parking badge, so excluding them from the DLA component is clearly an anomaly.

What we are talking about here is the difference of just £58 a week, which is a drop in the ocean for the Government when we consider just how few families this will affect, but it will have the potential to move some of those families away from unnecessary poverty.

I want to share with the House this testimony from a parent of a child receiving palliative care. They told us:

"My daughter has had a tracheotomy with a ventilator attached 24/7 since the age of eight months. She needs these for an undiagnosed neuromuscular condition. She cannot support herself at all. Carrying her, her vent, her suction machine, her oxygen, her emergency equipment to our car and back for two years was extremely difficult. We ended up selling our family car and purchasing a wheelchair accessible vehicle privately as it just became too hard to carry her as she grew."

Time is not on the side of these families. The best that we can do is to be on their side.

4.13 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. One person who must be looking forward to the recess is the speech writer of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is sadly no longer in his place, given the number of contributions that the hon. Gentleman makes in Parliament. He is probably busy writing an intervention for tonight's Adjournment debate. It was certainly interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman's comments.

I have three issues that I wish to raise. Hopefully, they will be the subject of some attention before we return in September. The first is the school funding formula. It was great to hear the announcements that were made earlier this week, which reflected much of the lobbying that had been done by Torbay schools. The next part is ensuring that we get the detailed figures for what it means per school, especially as it will mean that we can rebut some of the stuff that has been put out on the internet. I am looking forward to seeing the figures, and I know that many schools in Torbay will appreciate having the certainty that they will represent.

The key issue that I hope will be worked on over the summer relates to transport issues in my constituency. The first is around finally sorting out the remaining funding needed to deliver the first new station in Torbay for decades—at Edginswell. There is a strong business case, with local enterprise partnership support and £4 million in match funding, and the council has been told that delivery would be relatively easy, with planning permission in place and a site that is ready to go. I hope that the Department for Transport will decide to cut at least £1.5 million off the total cost of delivery by insisting that Network Rail covers the costs of realigning the track, which locally we suggest is a maintenance task.

The project has gone through all the GRIP—governance for railway investment projects—stage 3 documentation for Network Rail. The moment there is an announcement on funding from the new stations fund, a start could be made. I know that the council is keen to invest and the operator is keen to provide services. It would send a huge message about our ambitions in the bay, not least in developing the business park at Edginswell and supporting the nearby hospital, which has had numerous staff access issues, because a convenient train service would make a real difference. New housing estates are being built nearby, so the station would open up opportunities for residents to find jobs in the bay and slightly further afield. I hope that we can take the project forward when we return in September.

I also hope that by the time we return in September there will have been some progress on CrossCountry's proposals for a new train timetable. The initial proposals produced last year were nothing short of disgraceful.

[*Kevin Foster*]

CrossCountry attempted to portray them as an “improvement to your services”, even though that poster was on a platform at Torquay station from which all the services would be scrapped. I was pleased that those proposals were withdrawn, but discussions are still ongoing. I hope that by September we will have received confirmation that Torbay will definitely stay on track. I hope that families coming to the bay for a holiday will not have to change trains with their luggage at a busy Exeter St David’s station to what is joyfully called a “metro service” but is actually a commuter train that is likely to be overcrowded at particular times of the day and on which seats cannot be reserved.

One of my priorities over the recess will be to campaign with local residents on another transport issue: reinstating the bus services that were lost when Local Link, a local operator, ceased all its local routes back in April. Many have been reinstated—I am thinking of the No. 60, in particular—with a community bus operator or an alternative operator, but residents in Torbay Park, Ellacombe and the Lichfield Avenue area of Barton are still waiting. Given the topography of Torquay—the town of seven hills—someone might not be all that far from a bus route as the crow flies, but if that journey involves walking up a steep hill, for many elderly residents their bus pass becomes almost useless. If getting to the bus stop is fine, coming back might not be. I have started a petition, which I hope to present to the House in September. It is vital that we campaign for the return of those services, particularly given the information I have received that a route on a not-for-profit basis could well be viable. It is about sorting out capital funding for a new bus that would allow the service to be delivered.

Politics in Torbay is always at its best when we are talking about policies and delivery, not bickering about structures and personalities. That point will have particular prominence today back in the bay, given a meeting that is going on. I hope that all those elected to serve the most beautiful bay in the UK will remember that that must be the focus of their time and energy, and I hope that people see that it is the focus of my energies in this House.

I am conscious of time and know that other Members wish to speak, so I will draw my remarks to a close. I am looking forward to the recess because, as some Members will know, I got married on 10 June. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Thank you. Many things had to be cancelled because of a decision made by the other woman in my life—Mrs May, not Mrs Foster. For example, my stag night ended up being an election count, Hazel’s hen night was cancelled and our honeymoon was postponed. Hopefully we will find some time over the recess to have our honeymoon—as Hazel pointed out, the trip up to London this week to cover my office for a couple of days was not really what she was looking forward to. Recess will certainly be busy. I wish everyone in the House, including you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very enjoyable and productive break.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Happy honeymoon.

4.19 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): May I, on behalf of all the House, start by warmly congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on his wedding and wish him a very happy honeymoon, whenever that takes place?

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to raise a few issues that can be crowded out in the ordinary course of busy parliamentary business. In doing so, I will unapologetically focus on Cheltenham, because one thing I have learned over the last two years is that, for all the cynicism about our democratic process, Parliament does, indeed, remain the forum in which we can seek effective redress for our constituents and speak truth to power. We saw that in action with the Government’s welcome decision last week to allocate more frontline funding for our secondary schools, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and I saw it in the last Parliament, with the passage of legislation to extend the maximum sentence for stalking, following the terrible ordeal of a Cheltenham GP.

I would like to take the opportunity at the outset to congratulate all the students who are receiving awards at the National Star College leavers award ceremony in Gloucestershire. The National Star College, for those who do not know it, is an independent specialist further education college for people with physical disabilities, acquired brain injuries and associated learning difficulties. It is an extraordinary place; no one who visits it can fail to be moved by what is being achieved by staff and students alike.

What I want to talk about specifically today is Cheltenham General Hospital. We in Cheltenham value our hospital greatly. Members might think that that is a truism, but it is particularly the case in a town of 115,000 people. Only this morning, I received a message from a constituent, who referred to Cheltenham General, stating:

“My wife has been admitted there four times in the past two years—three times for surgery—and on each occasion—from the first visit of the paramedics to the A&E staff and on the various wards she has received the most wonderful attention—professional, kind, caring and patient.”

What a wonderful tribute, and it is not unusual. It is echoed by the findings of the recent Care Quality Commission report. Inspectors describe staff as “committed, caring and compassionate”. They also observed “exceptional teamwork”, particularly when a department was under pressure.

However, there is an issue about our night-time A&E. In 2013, Cheltenham General’s A&E service was downgraded. Blue light services were diverted to Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. Although night-time A&E notionally remained, and indeed remains, open for GP referrals and walk-ins, the reality is that a major service change took place. The emergency nurse practitioners, who do a magnificent job of holding the fort, do not have doctor support to assist them. That is important, because in the CQC report I referred to a few moments ago, medical and nursing staff raised concerns with inspectors about medical cover at night. To their great credit, consultants regularly work longer hours to support their junior colleagues. The CQC was not convinced that that was sustainable, and nor am I. That is notwithstanding the fact that the care that has been delivered is co-ordinated and multi-discipline.

What needs to be done? There is a clear problem with the recruitment of middle-grade doctors in A&E not just in Cheltenham but across the piece—the trust has made that clear, and the evidence bears it out. That is why I have called for a debate on the issue in this place, and I take the opportunity to raise it now.

Improving incentives for middle-grade A&E doctors is a crucial part of the long-term solution. In the short term, I welcome the fact that the trust is looking closely at providing an urgent care centre at Cheltenham General Hospital—something that was reported in the local paper, the *Gloucestershire Echo*, in March this year. Only today, we heard my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) extol the virtues of urgent care centres, because they provide urgent care, as the name might suggest, and, crucially, divert patients from accident and emergency—something we all have an interest in. An urgent care centre would see emergency nurse practitioners supported by GPs, which I welcome. However, that will take place only if we as a country increase the pipeline of GPs in our surgeries, and that means addressing the issue of rising GP indemnity—or insurance—premiums, which I have referred to previously.

The key point is that the people of Cheltenham want Cheltenham's A&E to be preserved and enhanced. I have made that point in the past and I will continue to make it. Some have raised with me a concern about whether the downgrading of night-time A&E was simply the thin end of the wedge that would presage the end of A&E in Cheltenham. After my election in 2015, I met representatives of the trust to make precisely that point and to raise precisely that concern. I was given a clear assurance regarding A&E's future; there was no suggestion of its demise. That was also the case in the following year, 2016, when I met the then chief executive, who described rumours of A&E closing as “blatant scaremongering” and confirmed:

“What we said to you on 5 June 2015 still stands and the board has not changed its position on A&E at Cheltenham General.”

I welcome that robust commitment to A&E. It must remain in place. Crucially, it must remain in place notwithstanding the recent finding of financial mismanagement at the trust—which, I should stress, predates the appointment of the current chief executive and chairman, who are doing an excellent job in uncovering these problems.

Retaining and enhancing A&E at Cheltenham General must remain a service priority. I say that because the idea that a resident in Battledown, Oakley, Charlton Kings or Charlton Park to the east of Cheltenham can readily get to A&E at Gloucestershire Royal hospital, having to travel all the way down the Golden Valley bypass and the A40 in a big traffic jam, is for the birds. Those of us who live there know that that is not a realistic or optimal solution.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to two constituents of mine, Lynda and Philip Hodder. Mr and Mrs Hodder are the parents-in-law of a young Australian woman who, in June of this year, was, very sadly, killed in Borough Market in the terrorist atrocities. The young woman who was killed was referred to by some as “the angel of London Bridge” because of the way that she sought to aid others who were coming under attack. The dignity, fortitude and courage shown by my constituents has been enormously humbling. It is what has fortified me in making the representations that I have made

about how we go about addressing the issue of those who are suspected and even convicted of terrorist offences in this country.

The point that my constituents have made to me, with a power that only people in that position can, is that while of course in a free society we rightly take account of the human rights of all people who come into contact with our criminal justice system—and yes, that must mean people who come into contact with it for terrorism offences—let us never forget that the most fundamental human right of all is the right to life of people who are innocent, decent, hard-working, law-abiding members of our community doing nothing more than going about their business, whether at Borough Market or anywhere else. Their rights must always be put first.

It is a huge privilege to be able to raise the concerns of my constituents in this great place, and to seek redress on their behalf. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to do so. I wish you and all Members of this House a very happy and restful recess.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Nigel Evans.

4.28 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Tail-end Charlie. [Laughter.] Me, not you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We have heard some powerful speeches here today, especially from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). I, too, lost a constituent, at the Manchester Arena. We need to do a lot more to support the families of those who survive after the loss of loved ones. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made a brilliant speech. If she wants to go to see any Ministers about increasing the sentences of these killers in motor vehicles, there are a lot of Conservative Members who will go with her to give support to that. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and I have a lot in common. He said he had a meteoric rise; I had a meteoric fall. I know which one I would prefer. I wish him good luck in his new job.

I have just two issues to raise. First, I am sure everyone in the Chamber was sickened by the news of the death of Cecil the lion two years ago, and today the news has come out that the son of Cecil has been shot by a trophy killer. What is wrong with the people who get any pleasure whatsoever from killing these beautiful endangered animals? If they want to shoot a lion, they should use a camera, and future generations would then be able to enjoy these wonderful creatures. I hope the Government will bring pressure to bear on the Governments of countries that allow such killers into their countryside to kill these beautiful creatures.

The second issue I want to raise is exactly the same as that mentioned by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders)—the leasehold freehold scam in our country. What is going on in Ribble Valley was brought to my attention before the general election. I do not know whether it is a north-west thing or is going on throughout the entire country. People are being recommended by builders to solicitors who then do not, funny enough, point out or indeed emphasise the fact that the ground rents they will pay, which may start off at a relatively modest amount, will double

[*Mr Nigel Evans*]

every 10 years for the next 50 years, so at the end of that period they may be paying £10,000 a year in ground rent to live in a house that they have paid for. It is an absolute scandal.

This is blighting the properties that people are now trying to sell. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that some building societies will not touch them or lend anybody money to buy them. Even worse, when people are about to buy a property, they are told, “Oh, you can buy the freehold later on. Don’t worry about that.” What has happened in the Ribble Valley? People went to Taylor Wimpey and said, “You said we had two years to buy the freehold. Well, we’d like to buy it.” They were expecting to pay £4,500, but they were told that the leases had been sold on to another company for a sum of money, and we are now talking about a considerable sum of money that the people wanting to buy the freehold will have to pay to an independent, third company. They were not told by Taylor Wimpey that that would happen.

I want to give one vivid example, which is the test case of Trevor and Margaret Knowell, who live on Calderstones Green in Whalley. They bought their property in 2011, when they were informed that they had a two-year window within which to buy the property’s leasehold. They contacted Taylor Wimpey’s legal team before the two years had expired, and they were told they were unable to purchase the leasehold because the negotiations with a third party were “too far gone” to halt and the leasehold was then sold to E & J Estates for £7,000. Having contacted E & J Estates, Mr Knowell bought the lease for £38,000, just months after the lease had been sold for £7,000.

I say to the Government—our manifesto said that we would get some reforms in this area—that this scam must be made illegal. We have to protect people unknowingly and unwittingly buying these properties who are then left wide open to being fleeced by a third party. The developer does not appear to care at all about putting people in an invidious position, and in any case should they really suggest solicitors to act on behalf of people who are buying their properties? That should also be made illegal, so that people get proper, independent advice. Had they been warned about this in the first place, such people would not have touched these houses, and the developers would not have been able to fabricate a scam that is now inflicting misery on so many people around this country.

4.33 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am pleased to be making my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as the shadow Deputy Leader of the House. I am very grateful to Members on both sides of the House for their kind words. I look forward to playing my role in continuing to ensure an open, modern Parliament, and one that reflects the priorities of the many in this country, not the few.

This is an important moment for our country and our democracy, and indeed for Parliament. Clement Attlee once said:

“Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.”

The interim Prime Minister tried that with her call for “no running commentary” on Brexit, but this Parliament and the people who send us here have been clear that we will discuss, debate and vote on the most significant change to legislation our country has seen in the past 40 years in this Session. Where it is in the interests of those we are proud to represent, we will be very pleased to work with Government Members. Our duty in this place is not yah-boo, but can-do. If by collaborating we can improve the lives of working people, that is what we must do.

I know from my own experience of working with Ministers since I came to the House two years ago, on issues such as the safety of towed trailers and improving apprenticeship opportunities, that we can make progress together. Where we have common ground, we must and will continue that approach. Since last we recessed, we have our new permanent memorial to our friend Jo Cox here to remind us that we do, indeed, have more in common.

Although hon. Members will be taking a vacation this summer, the daily struggle of millions of people to pay the bills knows no summer break. That is why colleagues from all parts of the House will, I know, be working hard to continue to help constituents.

We have heard this afternoon from many hon. Members about the issues that are close to their hearts, and it has been a pleasure to listen to Members from all parts of the House. We have had a magnificent maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who talked about austerity and its effect on Reading, and the need for a good relationship for the people of Reading as we leave the United—[Laughter.] That would be a step too far; I meant the European Union. I am a very collaborative person. My hon. Friend also spoke about the need for more affordable housing, particularly in the south of England. I am delighted to have another Labour colleague further down the M4, as we repopulate the M4 corridor with Labour Members.

We have heard a number of excellent speeches. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) talked, as he does so eloquently and regularly, about Yemen and the effects of cholera there at the moment. He is sending us all away on the Pioppi diet for the recess, and I am looking forward to partaking of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) talked about the NHS trust in his area and leasehold reform. He was joined in the latter by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who described what is going on with leasehold reform as

“the PPI of the house building industry”

and pointed out that if it continues, an Englishman’s home will no longer be his castle; it will be a revenue stream for offshore companies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) spoke eloquently about the CAPA provision for sixth-formers in her constituency, and I hope that she will be able to ensure that the dreams of the young people of Wakefield are realised. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) talked about the sugar tax and the need to combat the obesity epidemic. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood

and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke very movingly, as I have heard her do in other debates, about the need for justice for people who are severely affected by dangerous driving. I, too, look forward to the Government's consultation on that important issue.

If there was a theme among the many speeches that we have heard today, it was austerity and its impact. Several Conservative Members talked about urgent care centres and the impact of austerity on A&E departments, which is also a serious concern in my constituency. The hon. Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) talked about those matters. I welcome the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) to the House. She talked about the importance of EU citizens in her constituency.

As we head into the summer recess, it is worth reflecting on the contrasting nature of the weeks ahead, and comparing Labour Members with Conservative ones. I suspect that Conservative Members may be in for a more torrid and turbulent time. While I and my Labour colleagues will be returning to our constituencies to prepare for government—*[Interruption]*—focusing squarely ahead on the priorities of those we represent, Conservative Members will be looking over their shoulders for the next leadership bid, the next denial of ambition or the next briefing against, while perusing the latest betting odds that might tell them who to back in the inevitable contest.

Hon. Members who have spoken in previous summer Adjournment debates have offered sage vacation advice. Indeed, we have been invited to Southend to join in this year's carnival. My constituency of Bristol South is not known as a tourist destination, but if colleagues find themselves there, they might find time to visit the excellent Windmill Hill city farm and the splendidly rebuilt Ashton Gate stadium, where they could watch quality championship football when Bristol City kick off against Barnsley on 5 August. It will be the first step, I am told, in this year's promotion quest.

Finally, I wish hon. Members, the men and women who protect us, and the staff who serve us so well in these Houses a peaceful summer, and thank them for all that they do. In particular, may I congratulate and thank all those involved in suddenly closing down Parliament for the election and then resuming the services for continuing and new Members? It was a massive management and operational task. We should be grateful to them and I wish them some well-earned rest.

4.40 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is always a pleasure to be under your jurisdiction, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I start by warmly welcoming the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her position as shadow Deputy Leader of the House? I look forward to working with her on those collaborative and common-ground issues on which we can work together. I am sure we will continue to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) started this afternoon's debate. He puts his views extremely powerfully on the record. I am not going to say anything more about that.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) spoke once more about Yemen, an issue that is very close to his heart. He is a doughty campaigner, a powerful advocate for a wide variety of causes. He is not in his place because he has business elsewhere. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is fully engaged on the issue of the appalling cholera epidemic in Yemen and, of course, this Government are honouring the 0.7% GDP commitment to international development. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his newly elected position on the new all-party parliamentary group on immigration and visas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) spoke about a very wide variety of issues, from a visit from Her Royal Highness the Countess of Wessex to his belief that the BBC would be somewhat cheaper if he had a presenter's job. I think that is probably true, and maybe he should consider making an application. He always thanks and congratulates a wide variety of people in his constituency, and I know that they will very much appreciate being mentioned in this House. He is such a superb representative of his constituency and works very hard to represent everyone there.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) spoke next. He too is a powerful advocate, especially on the issue that several Members mentioned—leaseholders and freeholds and land rights. He is a doughty force as co-chair of the APPG on leasehold and commonhold reform. He does a powerful job as an advocate in that area, and I congratulate him on his work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) was, of course, responsible for the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. He got it on the statute book, which is a great accolade and a huge credit to him for his work in that quarter. He spoke about his fight for a smoke-free Britain and about war crimes, the importance of human rights and the issue of caste. He speaks regularly on issues that cross party divides—issues that we can all understand and support. I know that he is widely admired and respected by all quarters of society in his constituency, particularly those of the minority ethnic community, who very much appreciate his powerful representation on their behalf.

The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) gave his maiden speech, on which I congratulate him. I welcome him to this place. He spoke proudly of his constituency and spoke very well of his predecessors. I wish him well. I am sure that he will be an asset to his party. One of his predecessors whom he did not mention was none other than Rufus Isaacs, whose priorities, although more than 100 years ago, also included land reform, before world war one, as well as the legal standing of unions. He was a Liberal Member, but history remembers him very kindly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke powerfully about the flood disaster in 2007. Everyone remembers it as an appalling incident. He described how he organised a group of people to help his community and we thank him for that. He encouraged people to sign up to the Environment Agency's text alert system, and I join him in that. He spoke of the importance of local media. As constituency Members of Parliament, we all know how important our local

[Michael Ellis]

media are. My hon. Friend spoke of resilience, communities sticking together, leadership and a shared purpose. I support him and second his comments.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) spoke about a performing arts school in her constituency and how she had greatly enjoyed a production of “West Side Story”. She spoke so compellingly about it that I wish I had seen it. I have looked into the matter that she raised and she should receive a reply. She said that she had not received one and I shall follow that up. I will also forward her concerns to the Department for Education. I note that she said that she would welcome Channel 4. I hope her area could pay salaries commensurate with what might be expected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) also spoke about BBC salaries. That is, of course, a matter for the BBC, but there is disappointment about apparent gender disparity. Lord Hall has said that it was not where they wanted to be. My hon. Friend also spoke about Travellers and acknowledged that the law has dramatically improved in that area, but he wants a further robust approach and I think that many people in and outside his constituency would support him in that.

It was typically kind and considerate of the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) to think of the staff of Members who were not returned at the election. There is a unique contractual situation in this place for those staff—it is not the most secure position. Of course, it is the responsibility of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to keep those matters under review and I encourage him to speak to IPSA. He made some points with which I saw colleagues from different parties nodding in agreement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) is a frequent and powerful contributor in the Chamber. He spoke about the Corby Urgent Care Centre, where there are 70,000 patients, only 6% of whom needed to be referred on to hospital. The centre clearly does a good job. I am concerned that my hon. Friend is worried about it. I strongly recommend that the clinical commissioning group in the area meet him and that they work together. He is another doughty campaigner and he should get the support of everyone in his community in working for the wider interest there and the valuable urgent care centre.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke about the refugee crisis around the world and issues that are important to his constituency, including HMRC and immigration rules. Doubtless, many will have noted the power of his comments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) was full of praise, rightly, if I may say so, for Ministers—I think it was for Ministers in other Departments, not for me—as regards school funding. She said that there was more for schools in her constituency. There is more for other constituencies across the country, thanks to this Government. She is working with other Conservatives in her area to achieve a great deal for her constituency.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) was complimentary to the soft drinks industry for the work it is doing on a plan to reduce sugar. There is

always more that can be done, of course, as I am sure she would accept. She is right to fight against the problem of obesity, which is life-limiting and has an adverse and deleterious effect on the health of young people—on the health of people of all ages. No doubt she will continue her fight in that quarter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) spoke very fondly and movingly of Lucy, his staff member. I would like to mention her from this Dispatch Box as well. I do not know her, but I have no doubt that she has done a wonderful job for him. He also spoke of the aggression and intimidation he has received in his constituency. I know that that will not succeed against my hon. Friend. He is a powerful advocate for everyone in his constituency, and will no doubt reject and completely oppose those who use aggression and intimidation to try to get their way. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) proposed some radical reforms to leasehold, and no doubt he will pursue his cause with the passion that I know he has in this quarter. We will have to see where that takes us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) spoke about St Helier Hospital, and said it had the best A&E, with wonderful staff, I am sure. He spoke of the fracture and renal units there. I take this opportunity to thank the staff at that hospital and all our NHS staff around the country for the work they do to help those who need medical attention. There is work to do for that hospital, my hon. Friend said, and I am sure he will be a powerful advocate for it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the Royal Black Preceptory, which was formed in 1797, and is apparently often called the senior of the loyal orders fraternal societies. I know that all Members in this House would want to wish everyone and all the communities in Northern Ireland all the very best.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) is a new Member and I welcome her to this place. She says that her priority is to support small businesses, and rightly so. The unemployment rate in her constituency stands at 2.1%, so she is obviously doing a good job. She also spoke about fake news. We have to stop false or fake news reports worrying voters unnecessarily. Other Members also mentioned that. I know that my hon. Friend will be an advocate for her constituents’ interests in this House, hopefully for many years.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke very movingly about the death of Joseph and many others. There was an appalling collision in Joseph’s case and in other cases. Understandably, she is concerned about the apparent disparity between the sentencing and what those in society whom she is campaigning with would see as right. My heart goes out to all the families she mentioned, and there are so many others. Law changes take time. She is a powerhouse of a campaigner, and I am sure she will continue her work. I understand that a response to the consultation is hoped for soon.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) spoke about an important piece of constituency casework. I recommend that Calibre Homes conduct

themselves with appropriate care when it comes to my hon. Friend and have respect for his role as Member of Parliament for his constituency.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) spoke movingly and powerfully about children with complex needs. I know that Her Majesty's Government are working with Motability on the particular point that he raised. He also spoke movingly about his son. His family must be proud of him for being here, and it must be difficult for him to be some distance from Glasgow East when he is serving his constituents in this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) had a list of local issues. From his speech, it will be obvious to anyone who did not already know it that he is an active local representative. He spoke of the beautiful bay that he represents and mentioned the fact that he was married on 10 June. I congratulate him and wish him well. I presume that his being here today is part of his honeymoon. I hope that he will be keeping an eye on his emails in the weeks ahead. I wish him all the very best.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) was one of a number of Members who spoke passionately about their local hospital. He is fighting for, and with, Cheltenham General Hospital. His is a powerful voice, and he is a hard-working Member here. He says that he has been given repeated assurances about his hospital. He also spoke about the dignity and fortitude of the relatives of people who have been killed, particularly in terrorist attacks. I endorse what he said, and I offer the respect of everyone in the House for those family members. Our hearts go out to them in these difficult times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) said that, as the last Member to speak, he was the tail-end Charlie. Others have called him other things, but one thing he certainly does is speak powerfully in the House. I know that millions will agree with what he said about Cecil the lion's son being killed by a poacher. We all hope that the maximum force of the law will be applied to those who kill wildlife and endangered animals in that way. My hon. Friend also spoke about ground rent issues. I would say that those he is up against in his constituency and elsewhere ought to be careful, because he is one of the men in grey suits who are spoken of apocryphally and who get things done in this place and elsewhere. In all seriousness, the scams that are perpetrated on our constituents must be dealt with.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I should like to take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers, as well as all the staff—the parliamentary staff, the constituency staff and the civil service staff—and I wish everyone all the very best for a peaceful summer.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I, too, wish everyone a very safe recess. Please take your safety and security seriously over the summer, and we look forward to September. I thank all the staff involved in keeping us safe, fed and looked after in this House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

4.59 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I should like to associate myself with what you and the Deputy Leader of the House have said in thanking everyone for looking after us. I have a question on a bit of procedure. It is a shame that Mr Speaker is not in the Chair, because he might have been able to give me a slightly more forceful answer. You have just put the Question to the House at the end of our debate. I understand that when more people are in favour, you say, "The Ayes have it, the Ayes have it", and when more are against, you say, "The Noes have it, the Noes have it." What happens if there are equal numbers on each side? Would you say, "The ties have it, the ties have it"?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Very good! No, what I would say is, "I have it. I have it." And if anyone wants to join the big five group, there is a new all-party parliamentary group that has been formed today by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans).

PETITIONS

Higham Ferrers General Practice Surgery

5 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): In my constituency, many of the doctors' surgeries provide excellent availability and quality of service, but there is a problem in one area. If I read the petition, the situation will be made clear.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of Higham Ferrers, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the Higham Ferrers General Practise Surgery is facing significant strain and requires support to meet its waiting time and quality of care obligations to patients.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department of Health, NHS England and the Higham Ferrers Surgery to work together to ensure that waiting times are reduced and the quality of care improves at the Higham Ferrers Surgery.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P002048]

Planning application in Irthingborough

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): A similar online petition echoes the concerns outlined in this petition and has received 359 signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of the UK,

Declares that the planning application 17/00969/OUT should be rejected; further that local roads are not suitable for increased traffic flow, and already pose issues for emergency vehicles; further that local schools are already at full capacity; further that local doctors and dentists are already at full capacity; further that the land is situated next to the Nene Wetlands conservation area and it is known that various species live on or around that land; further that the land is on a flood plain and the developer has been unable to satisfy the requirements outlined by the Environment Agency in respect of this; further that, the land was sold for use as agricultural or equine land, and it is believed that when the land

[*Tom Pursglove*]

was put up for sale an interested party approached the council to seek outline planning permission to build stables on this land and permission was denied; and further that the developer has not carried out an acoustic survey in relation to the electrical transformer as requested by environmental protection.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel East Northamptonshire Council to reject the planning application to build 124 houses on green belt land to the rear of Nicholas Road, Irthingborough.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002049]

Continuation of local bus services in Congleton Constituency

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of over 200 residents, expressing concern about the review and potential closure of local bus service 315 from Alsager. It echoes similar concerns that I have received from constituents regarding the 78 from Rode Heath to Leighton Hospital and the 319 through Goostrey, Holmes Chapel and Sandbach. The petition declares that the closure of the 315 would have a disproportionate impact on the local community and requests support for retention of the service.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that it is the opinion of Alsager residents, shop keepers and market traders that plans to close the 315 local bus service are ill-considered, and will have a disproportionate impact on Alsager as a whole; further that the 315 service should be retained; and further that a local petition has received 201 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the retaining of the 315 bus service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002050]

Future of the NHS

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

5.4 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Before I start my speech, may I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Speaker and all the office staff, the police and everyone else who takes care of us here? I wish them all a very happy summer recess, when they all go off on their holidays. We are extremely grateful for all that is done.

First, I thank and praise all those who work in the NHS, especially those on the frontline. Secondly, it would be inappropriate of me not to pay tribute to our able and competent Front-Bench team, who face some extremely difficult challenges within the NHS. My speech today is in no way at all a criticism of the Government; it is purely based on my own observation and the observations of others, in part in Dorset but also from around the country. I hope Ministers will forgive and indulge me as I honour one of my election pledges and bring this matter to the Government’s attention.

As I said, in essence I am responding to my own observations and to those of the many people I have spoken to, who work either in or around the NHS. I, we and they are proud of our NHS, and rightly so. As Nigel Lawson, the former Chancellor, so memorably said, “It’s the nearest thing we have to a national religion”.

The NHS will be 70 years old next year; it is the world’s fifth largest employer, with 1.5 million employees; and it serves a population of the United Kingdom of more than 54 million people. The total budget for NHS England is a staggering £117 billion. The three founding principles of the NHS—that it is available to all, free at the point of delivery and based upon clinical need rather than the ability to pay—still stand. Last week, the US-based Commonwealth Fund health think-tank found the NHS to be the best, safest and most affordable healthcare system of the 11 countries it analysed, for the second time in a row. That is a record to be proud of.

However, the NHS is, to some degree, a victim of its own success. That same study placed the UK second from bottom for clinical outcomes. So what to do? Politicians take a scalpel to the NHS at their peril. The consequence is that only sticking plaster is used to meet changing circumstances. Medical advances, longer life-spans and soaring healthcare costs have outpaced resources, and the situation can only get worse.

A recent Public Accounts Committee report found that the financial performance of NHS bodies had deteriorated, with NHS trusts seeing their deficits almost treble to £2.6 billion in a single year, 2015-16. Plugging those deficits will not be easy. Addressing the shortage of nurses and GPs, coping with a strained adult social care system, responding to an overstretched A&E service and countering ambulance waiting times all require careful thought and perhaps further review.

I am a former soldier and we used to say in the Army that time on reconnaissance is never wasted, so a visit to the frontline—in my speech—is instructive. A senior doctor on my Dorset patch despairs at the “army of office staff” who leave every evening on the dot of 5 pm, while work in the hospital, which he emphasises has

always been a seven-day service, rolls on. He believes that administrative staff could be cut by about 25% without affecting patient care.

That senior doctor says the so-called “bed bureaus” in most hospitals are a case in point. When a patient is admitted, doctors must book a bed through bed managers—there is one per shift, so three per day—who, in turn, inform the ward sisters, who were themselves once responsible for the beds on their wards. In fact, the bed managers are often very senior nurses who have been promoted out of their clinical roles into well-paid managerial jobs. Formerly, such senior nurses were an invaluable source of knowledge and training for junior nurses, but it now seems there is a risk that their hard-earned skills will be wasted in administrative roles.

To be fair, the NHS says that managers have been cut by 18% since 2010. However, in the view of the senior doctor I am referring to, there is still ample opportunity better to share back-office functions across regions, especially in commissioning services, purchasing and postgraduate medical education for doctors. For those who are unaware, newly qualified doctors apply to a regional deanery for further training in foundation years 1, 2 and 3. That deanery remains responsible for their rotations until they choose their clinical specialty, three years after qualifying. Therefore, my doctor source asks, why are there education managers, deputy education managers and deputy assistant education managers in most hospitals he has worked in? In addition, he points out that nurses are efficiently certified and accredited by their own system, so they do not need in-house education managers, either.

The pressure on social care has also had a significant impact on acute hospitals, says this doctor. Like hospital administrative staff, care home staff are available to assess prospective new residents only during office hours, leaving A&E departments—often with elderly patients who are not strictly emergencies—to languish until Monday morning. Occupational therapists are also unavailable until Monday morning, meaning patients cannot be sent home because their homes cannot be certified as safe. In addition, A&E departments are frequently overwhelmed by patients suffering from mental health issues.

The under-16s pose a particular problem, certainly in Dorset, because the office hours of the children’s mental health assessment service are from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. Most young patients present at night, when stress, depression or suicidal thoughts tend to rear their ugly heads. An A&E doctor is unable even to prescribe a sedative. Instead, dedicated nurses must be found to watch the young patient constantly until Monday morning, when a child psychiatrist can see them.

In addition, the NHS internal market, which has been with us since John Major’s Government, has also had unintended consequences. Procuring goods and services across a region, rather than restricting individual commissions to each small trust, would save millions, says this doctor. So what can be done? Clearly, the current situation is unsustainable in the longer term. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), if I may paraphrase him, has said that the NHS is so rapacious that it could probably never be satisfied. However, there must be another solution.

Healthcare spending is protected relative to other public services, but increasing demand and costs surely demand we think a little more out of the box. As I have

mentioned, hospital deficits reached £2.6 billion in 2015-16, negating the benefits of any funding increases. Projections from the Office for Budget Responsibility suggest that spending on healthcare could rise from 7.4% of GDP in 2015 to 8.8% in 2030-31, which is the equivalent of a real increase in spending of £100 billion.

The Office for National Statistics predicts that the proportion of people aged 65 and over will increase from the current level of 18% to 26.1% in 2066, with over-85s tripling to 7.1% over the same period. A study by the King’s Fund found that financial pressures have affected access to services and quality of patient care, while the Care Quality Commission’s latest report concluded that the quality of care provided across England varies considerably.

When compared with member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the UK spends less per capita than France, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. We also perform poorly on many acute care indicators, with worse outcomes for stroke victims, heart attacks, and cancer survival over five and 10 years. With more people, better and more expensive technology and greater expectations, the pressures will continue to grow.

A significant new House of Lords report, “The Long-term Sustainability of the NHS and Adult Social Care”, describes a “culture of short-termism” across successive Governments. Interestingly, the report calls for a new political consensus on the future of the health and care system via

“cross-party talks and a robust national conversation.”

I do not entirely agree, but I will come on to that later.

The report concludes:

“Short-term funding fixes will not suffice. Neither will tinkering around the edges of service delivery.”

It made three recommendations: that there should be radical service transformation, with more integrated health and care services in primary and community settings; that there should be long-term, stable, predictable and adequate funding for the NHS and adult social care; and that there should be immediate and sustained action on adult social care, with urgent funding to alleviate the crisis in NHS hospitals. It is not just the Lords who have an opinion; these are coming in thick and fast from across the political spectrum, including from the King’s Fund, the Barker commission, the Nuffield Trust, the Health Foundation, the Public Accounts Committee, the Care Quality Commission and a number of parliamentary Select Committees.

To be fair, a good start has been made. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 abolished primary care trusts, to be replaced by 44 clinical commissioning groups, responsible for commissioning the majority of NHS services. Since 2015, those in turn have developed local sustainability and transformation plans, as part of the NHS five year forward view. The STPs are blueprints for better integration of GP, community health, mental health, cancer care and hospital services, focusing on more joined-up working with home care and care homes. The Government are to be congratulated on all of that. I am delighted and touched that this week Dorset’s STP has been awarded more than £100 million by the Government. Dorset is also one of eight areas nationally to announce an accountable care system, which will fast-track these improvements, especially taking the

[Richard Drax]

strain off A&E departments and making GP appointments easier to get. It will share in a £450 million pot. The STPs are, say NHS England, “a starting point for local conversations”.

We all hope so. Dorset’s CCG is currently poring over responses to its public consultation which closed in February. Some of its proposals, including moving A&E services from Poole to Bournemouth, and losing community hospital beds on Portland and at Wareham, I find difficult to accept.

Inevitably, some of the CCG’s remit must be to find savings. Various suggestions have been made in the past: the Carter review in 2016 found that £5 billion could be saved through shared procurement and back office support; the Naylor review in 2017 concluded that better management of the NHS estate could generate £5 billion and provide land for 26,000 new homes; and the Wachter review suggested that better IT systems would help. Whatever savings are made can then be reinvested in the NHS’s most precious asset of all, those on the frontline, where there are genuine concerns.

A House of Lords report described the lack of an appropriately skilled, well trained and committed workforce as the

“biggest internal threat to the sustainability of the NHS”.

A shortfall of some 10,000 GPs across the UK is predicted by 2020. At the same time, hundreds of GP practices are in danger of closing because 75% of their doctors are aged over 55. Nurses are wooed now with flexible hours and school-friendly schedules, but the abolition of the nursing bursary earlier this year has seen the number of applicants applying to start nursing degrees this October fall by 23%. I know from my own research into ambulance waiting times that the ambulance trust covering my constituency is having trouble both recruiting and retaining staff.

We all agree, in all parts of this House, that the NHS is a unique national treasure, to be protected, sustained and nurtured, but it cannot remain a sacred cow, untouchable at any cost. So why do we not hand this problem to an independent panel, totally divorced from politicians, and ask it to see how we can make better use of the £117 billion that we spend? From what I have heard and seen, I simply cannot believe there is not a better way of running our beloved NHS. The will from those in all parts of the House is there, so let’s be bold, take politics out of it, simplify the way the NHS is run and channel more resources to the frontline.

5.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a great pleasure to join you in the House for the last debate before the summer break, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing this debate and commend his timing, as it is two days after we laid the Department of Health and NHS entities’ 2017 accounts before Parliament. He will note from what I am sure will be his diligent scrutiny of those accounts that provider deficits have been much reduced in the year that has just ended compared with the figure he cited for the previous year. That is a tribute to the focus of

managers and trust leaders on securing the financial balance that the NHS as a whole has delivered over the past year.

To put all that in context, this is a time when more people than ever are using the health service. In 2016-17, some 23.4 million people attended A&E departments in England—2.9 million more than in 2010. The overwhelming majority of patients continue to be seen within four hours, and the NHS overall sees more than 1,800 more patients within the four-hour standard every day compared with 2010. In the previous year, the NHS carried out 11.6 million operations—some 1.9 million more than in 2010. That provides the context of the achievement and the treatments that have been given to patients throughout the land.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend recognised the excellent care that the NHS provides, which has been demonstrated for the second year running by the Commonwealth Fund report: in its international study published last week, the UK was ranked as the No. 1 health system in a comparison of 11 countries. That is a testament to NHS staff. The patients who benefit from those treatments rate their experience of care highly. The adult in-patient survey, which was released in May, shows that the majority of patients report that their overall experience was good, with 85% rating it as at least seven out of 10—a slight improvement on the previous year.

Looking to the future, which is the subject of the debate, the Government are committed to increasing the NHS budget to ensure that patients get the high-quality care they need. By 2020-21, NHS spending will increase by £8 billion in real terms from the 2015-16 baseline. That will deliver an increase in real funding per head of the population for every year of this Parliament. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is right to point out that whatever funding we provide, it is important that we spend it to achieve the best possible outcomes for patients.

It is essential that we ensure that the NHS continues to make the most effective use of its resources to deliver high-quality patient care, so I recognise what I think was my hon. Friend’s motivation in securing this debate and raising this subject before the House rises for the summer recess. We all agree that it is important to target NHS funding to frontline services, which is why we are investing in the workforce and there are already more than 33,800 extra clinical staff, including almost 11,700 more doctors and almost 13,000 more nurses on our wards since May 2010.

NHS management is an important element of ensuring an efficient NHS, but of course we are keen to ensure that an increasing proportion of NHS funding goes to patient-facing services. Between 2010-11 and 2016-17, the proportion of the NHS pay bill spent on managers declined from 6.5% to 5.8%, which I am sure my hon. Friend will welcome. We are also reducing the number of people involved in management, which he called for. Between May 2010 and March 2017, the number of managers and senior managers in NHS providers and support organisations reduced from some 37,000 to around 31,000—I think that is similar to the effective percentage to which my hon. Friend referred. We are also looking to manage the rate of pay of senior managers, again to ensure that as much as possible is focused on the frontline.

It is important that we recognise that leadership is as important in the NHS as it is in any organisation—we must ensure that we have high-quality leadership across organisations. I for one am keen not to bash the managers in a somewhat traditional manner, but to recognise that high-quality leadership in our NHS organisations is important in driving high-quality performance for patients. That is why I have been working with the leadership academy in Health Education England to ensure that we have two things: a pipeline of talent so that we can identify quality individuals at the beginning of their careers in the NHS and track them as they pursue their careers, identifying the leaders of tomorrow, in a similar system to that with which my hon. Friend will be familiar from his service in the military; and some consideration of how we can get more clinicians involved in leadership roles in their organisations. Clearly, we have directors of nursing and medical directors in all provider trusts, but too few go on to take up the most senior leadership positions as chief executives.

Richard Drax: I am listening carefully to the Minister. Would it be naive to say that what we want to see is matron, in the form of Hattie Jacques, back on the wards and to hand far more administrative work, if that is the right phrase, back to clinicians, with whom it originally lay?

Mr Dunne: I am not keen to hand administrative work to clinicians, but I recognise that there is a role for ensuring that senior clinicians are present and in charge of activity in wards. That is the experience I am seeing as I visit acute hospitals around the country: senior members of staff, normally coming out of nursing staff—so they are a matron or other senior nursing officer—are responsible for what happens on their ward.

My hon. Friend says that an independent review might be appropriate, and I say gently to him that we think that the right way to drive improvement across the NHS and help position it for the challenges of the future is to back the plans prepared by the leadership of NHS England with colleagues from across the system through the five year forward view. This is the NHS's own plan for change and it lays out how the NHS can transform services and improve standards of care while building a more responsive modern health service. We are backing this plan, enabling the NHS to deliver Government objectives including seven-day services and improved access to cancer treatments and mental health services. We agree that the answer to the challenges faced by the NHS lies in modernising services and keeping people well and independent for longer.

The NHS is using the sustainability and transformation partnerships mentioned by my hon. Friend to deliver that vision through transformation across local areas.

These are clinically led, locally driven and can deliver real improvements for patients. The five year forward view also announced the development of new care models and we are already seeing the results.

My hon. Friend referred to the announcement yesterday about the first allocation of capital funding for the most advanced STP areas, including Dorset, which covers his constituency. It is fortuitous that the largest single beneficiary of capital through the STP allocation was Dorset, and what a great day for him to secure this debate and give an albeit somewhat guarded welcome to that significant capital injection. I am aware that he has a number of issues with how that money will be spent.

Richard Drax: It was totally unguarded. I am extremely grateful, as I am sure all clinicians and all those who work in the NHS in Dorset will be.

Mr Dunne: That applause is on the record, and I am delighted that my hon. Friend takes that view.

We see this investment as backing the exemplar STP plans that have been published thus far, and we hope that other areas, whose plans are in less good shape, will be encouraged to look at those that have succeeded to see what they can do to follow their example for the next phase of the roll out in the coming years.

I will conclude with a couple of comments about how we drive efficiency through the NHS and make best use of resources. My hon. Friend referred to the Carter and the Naylor reviews. Carter is driving heavily towards using best practice and removing variability across the NHS, whether in clinical practice or in financial performance, in areas such as procurement. Alongside that, Naylor is looking at how we drive out inefficiency from back-office functions, from estates and from the facilities management element of running such a substantial network of hospitals and facilities across the country. There is scope to do more. That will appeal to my hon. Friend's desire to put more resources on the frontline. We are looking at encouraging organisations to share back-office facilities—as he called for—to bring down cost and drive up efficiency and operational productivity, which is the right way to go.

I conclude by confirming that we are making good progress in small steps. We need to continue to make progress to try to raise the depth of the tread of the steps that we are taking to ensure that the NHS is fit to serve the health needs of this population for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 July 2017

[JOAN RYAN in the Chair]

Balancing the Public Finances

9.30 am

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): If Members wish to remove their jackets, they should feel free to do so, and of course their ties—I have removed mine, as you can see.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of balancing the public finances.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this new Parliament, Ms Ryan. This is the first time I have secured a Westminster Hall debate since the general election. If you will forgive the indulgence, it is also a great pleasure to see the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), in his place. He served with tremendous distinction in the Whips Office, which I had the pleasure of leading after the 2015 general election, and I am pleased to see him in his current role. I look forward to him responding to the debate.

I am conscious that a large number of Members wish to speak, so I will speak for a little less time than I had originally intended. The first thing worth drawing to the attention of the Chamber, however, is how few Opposition Members are present, which I find astounding. To draw some conclusions from the attendance, we can see that the Conservative party and our allies in the Democratic Unionist party believe in balancing the public finances and making the difficult decisions necessary to ensure that we can grow the economy and create jobs. Judging by the turnout on the Opposition Benches, or rather the lack of turnout, the Labour party is clearly not interested in balancing the public finances or making sensible decisions; all that it is interested in is spending other people's money until it runs out. Whereas, so many Conservatives are here that they are having to move right around the Chamber and take over the other side.

I will probably have to draw my remarks to a close sooner than I had expected, in order to allow other Members to speak, so let me do a quick précis of my argument. We have come a long way since 2010: we have cut the deficit by three quarters; we have had faster economic growth than almost any country in the G7 largest countries; and we have cut unemployment to levels not seen since I was at primary school in 1975. That is incredibly important, because those are not just statistics; they represent real people getting the opportunities to succeed and thrive.

There are things that we should be proud of, and we could and should have talked about them more during the election campaign. I was very pleased to hear the Chancellor's outstanding speech in the debate on the Queen's Speech, in which he set out our economic record and our plans for the future. My central message

at the conclusion of my speech today will be that although we face difficult decisions and many pressing needs for spending public money, we need to raise that money while keeping taxes low and economic growth moving along. Those are difficult decisions. The Chancellor is the man who must make those decisions, and he must make them in a balanced way, taking into account all the factors, including economic growth. He needs to make those decisions at the Budget in the autumn, and Conservative colleagues should give him our support in doing so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent speech. Is it not the case that Britain has become addicted to public sector debt? The truth is that since 2002 Governments of both colours have been spending more each year than we have been collecting in taxes. If we are to stop doing that in future, it will be a bit like a drug addict coming off drugs.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend sets out clearly what has happened in the past, and I want to spend a little time on the challenges facing us in the future, but it is worth looking at the economic record. We did not make the decisions and get the success we have had easily; they were contested, and our political opponents challenged us every step of the way. But we have been successful, which gives us the credibility to talk about facing the challenges of the future.

When we came to power in 2010, the budget deficit was the equivalent of just under 10% of the size of the economy, at £150 billion a year. According to the most recent set of actual figures, we have reduced the cash deficit to £46 billion—down by 70%—and the deficit as a proportion of the size of the economy is down by 75% to 2.5%. That is a significant achievement, and it means that in this Parliament the size of our stock of national debt as a proportion of the size of the economy will start to fall. That is incredibly important for the future.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. The impact is not simply one of taxes and of borrowing and spending, but of Government spending on personal finances, which has a massive impact because of interest rates and personal interest rates. If we let borrowing get out of control, interest rates in the real economy would rise. That is when we have repossession, and that then is when we have a depression.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we let the public finances get out of control, interest rates would rise and hard-pressed families who are having to make difficult decisions would see the cost of their mortgages and other debts go up, which would not make their lives any easier at all.

Let us consider the impact of controlling the public finances on the real economy. If we look at growth, at how fast the economy has grown over the past seven years, we see that our economic performance among the G7 largest countries in the world has been second only to that of the United States. Interestingly, we have grown our economy at almost double the rate of our nearest neighbour, France. In 2014 and 2016 we were the fastest growing G7 country, and the joint fastest in

[*Mr Harper*]

2015. That is an impressive record. I mention that because our political opponents often pretend that balancing the public finances has not worked, but in generating economic growth it absolutely has worked.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. Will he join me in welcoming the fact that the reduction in corporation tax to 19% has brought in the highest yields ever, bringing another £11 billion into the economy? Does he have any thoughts on what increasing the rate to, say, 26% would have on jobs and, importantly, our ability to reduce the deficit?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend, who makes a good point, tempts me to leap forward to the end of my remarks, but I will say only this about taxes: there is a big difference between rates of tax and how much money is raised. As Conservatives, we believe that the purpose of taxes is to raise money to pay for our public services. The Chancellor made it clear in the debate on the Queen's Speech that by reducing the tax rate, thereby encouraging businesses to locate here and be more successful, we raised more money to pay for those public finances—I think the Chancellor said £18 billion more.

Looking at that performance, it seems to me likely that if we were to raise corporation tax two things would happen: first, we probably would not raise the money, so although we might pat ourselves on the back and pretend that we were raising taxes, we would not raise the money to pay for public services; and secondly, it is fairly obvious to everyone, or to everyone on the Government side of the House, that those taxes do not fall on businesses at all. When we raise taxes on business, there is no mystical “business” to pay them; those taxes fall either on workers, who will receive smaller pay rises, or on customers, who will see higher prices. Taxes all feed through, so everyone in the economy would pay the price of any corporation tax rises, which probably would not raise any more money to pay for our public services, so we would be shooting ourselves in the foot. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) makes exactly the right point.

I also want to mention our record on jobs, which is what I am proudest of: 3 million more people are now in work than were when we first came into office. Let me give the specific example—I think this will be heartening—of the impact on young people. In 2010 the unemployment rate among young people in this country was about 20%, which is comparable with that of our neighbours in the European Union and in the eurozone. Since we came into office, to this point, in those countries the unemployment rate among young people has been broadly flat, up a little but still around 20%. In our country it is down six percentage points, to 13%. That is not just a statistic; it means that hundreds of thousands of young people have had the opportunity to get a job when they leave school, college or university.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing the debate. We reduced corporation tax from 28% to 20% but actually increased the tax take. As we exit the European Union, we will

need to encourage more businesses to come to this country and create more employment, so it is essential that we reduce taxes further, rather than putting them up. That is the difference between the Government and the Opposition.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As we are going to leave the European Union, we want to be more global and outward-looking and we want more companies to locate in Britain, so it seems to me that this is exactly the wrong time—if there ever is a good time—to increase corporate tax rates.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of what this Government have done for young people, but can he tell us how many people in the figure he mentioned are on exploitative zero-hours contracts? If the Government are so passionate about young people, why will they not pay them a real living wage? Why are they discriminating against the under-25s?

Mr Harper: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman raises zero-hours contracts. It simply is not true that everyone on a zero-hours contract is being exploited. There is some good evidence from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. I am not sure whether these data have been updated, but it did a survey in 2014 that showed that around 63% of people on a zero-hours contract—higher than the proportion of people on a permanent full-time contract—were satisfied with their terms and conditions. Most people on zero-hours contracts actually find that they fit their requirements, because they are either students or people with caring responsibilities.

There are of course people who would prefer not to be on a zero-hours contract. That is why I welcome Matthew Taylor's review, which was published today. He thinks that employees should have the right to ask their company to put them on a permanent contract. Indeed, McDonalds recently offered that to its employees. It is true that some of its staff on flexible contracts said that they would prefer to move to a fixed-term contract, but about 80% preferred to stay on a flexible contract because it suited them. I just do not agree with the contention that a zero-hours contract is by definition exploitative. In many cases, it suits the worker and it suits the business—it is a win-win. But it is completely true that if such contracts do not suit people, it is better that they should have the opportunity to move to a full-time or permanent contract to guarantee them hours. I am pleased with Matthew Taylor's report.

My final point about youth unemployment concerns what happens to young people's opportunities in countries that do not deal with their public finances. The most obvious example is Greece, which clearly has not dealt with its public finances, where 47%—nearly half—of young people are without work. Countries that do not deal with their public finances damage young people's opportunities, probably for their lifetime. I do not want us to go down that road and be that sort of country; I want us to keep focused on balancing the public finances.

There is an interesting factor relevant to my constituency. I looked at a debate in the House in 1983, in which my predecessor but two, Paul Marland, spoke. He pointed out that at that time unemployment in his constituency was 15.3%, which was 2% above the national average. I

am pleased that, seven years into a Conservative Government, unemployment in my constituency is 1.6%, which is below the average for the south-west—1.7%—and below the United Kingdom average. Our economic record has not just delivered for the United Kingdom and for the south-west; it has absolutely delivered for my constituents, who now have the opportunity to be in work, which is important for their families.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is giving a characteristically powerful speech, which is why this debate is so well attended. In my constituency, youth unemployment has fallen by a staggering 61%, making a real difference to people's lives. That is partly due to the expansion of apprenticeships, which more than 10,000 students have started. Last week I was proud to attend once again the graduation ceremony at Swindon College, where we are equipping young people with the real skills they need.

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. He knows—not everyone in the Chamber will—that Swindon is my home town. I actually did my A-levels at Swindon College, so I am particularly pleased to hear that that institution is still delivering opportunities. The opportunities that I got at a comprehensive school in Swindon and at Swindon College meant that I was the first person in my family to go to university, and definitely the first person in my family to make it to the House of Commons. I am pleased to have had those opportunities, and I want every young person in our country to have them too. That is why this matters.

All that I will say about the Opposition—[HON. MEMBERS: “Where are they?”] My hon. Friends make the point that there are hardly any of them here. [Interruption.] An hon. Friend says that they are out spending. They opposed all the reductions in public expenditure over the past seven years. It seems to me, having done a back-of-the-envelope calculation, that the debt would already have been more than £300 billion higher based on the Opposition’s public spending plans, and that if they had carried on spending at the rate they were when they left office, an extra £1 trillion would have been added to the public debt by the end of this Parliament. At the last general election, the Labour party manifesto was just, “Spend, spend, spend other people’s money,” with no credible plan to pay for it. That is not the route that our country should follow. The fact that so few Opposition Members are here to defend their plans tells us everything we need to know.

Having gone through our record and why I think we have been successful, let me say a few words about the challenges we face. Public sector pay is an important topic—in fact, it is what prompted me to call this debate. We all know hard-working public sector workers in our constituencies. It is good to pay them fairly for the jobs they do, but it is also fair that we look at all our constituents—those who work in the public sector and those who work in the private sector. It is worth reminding ourselves that after the financial crash a lot of people in the private sector experienced reductions in their pay, which did not happen in the public sector. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which is a respected organisation, public sector workers are still paid slightly better than private sector workers, even after adjusting

for qualification levels. Even after some public sector pay restraint, the levels of pay in the private and public sectors are about the same, and people in the public sector obviously have the benefit of a more generous final salary pension scheme.

We have not talked much about the fact that the 1% pay cap is of course a cap not on individuals’ pay but on the pay scales. Most people will not be aware that, even with that pay cap, many public sector workers have actually seen significant rises in their pay because they have moved up pay bands. I think that half of national health service staff have had a pay rise of more than 3%. Teachers have had an average pay rise of 3%, because many, unless they have a performance issue, move up the pay bands during their career. That is on top of the 1% pay rise. We need to look at all those facts and conduct the debate in the proper spirit.

There are many pressures on public spending. There is public sector pay and funding for our national health service and for social care, and colleagues want more money put into schools. Part of the challenge of being in government is that we cannot say yes to everyone; we have to make choices and set priorities. The right way to do that is to look at the economic growth forecast, at how much tax revenue we think we will have, and at recruitment needs in public services. We have to look at all those things together.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On the overall issue of rebalancing the public finances, does he agree that there is an example of effective and pragmatic expenditure in the recent announcement by the Prime Minister and the leader of my party? Is not it a good idea to have investment in an area of the United Kingdom such as Northern Ireland, where there has been high dependency on the public sector, in an effort to reduce the debt that is due to Northern Ireland, by the creation of private sector finance and private investment and thus better investment opportunities and more jobs? Is that a good project for the rest of the United Kingdom to follow?

Mr Harper: I welcome that intervention, because one of the things that we set out in our manifesto, and that the Chancellor set out in the House of Commons, is our plan to invest across the United Kingdom in infrastructure such as broadband, to help the economy and businesses to be more productive. That is how to raise tax revenue, grow the economy and create the jobs that enable us to spend money on our public services.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is right to highlight the importance of jobs, growth and apprenticeships, which should be at the forefront of any general election debate in a normal time. Does he agree that the public services are under pressure at the moment? We must recognise that. I work in those public services and I see it in my working life. According to the latest forecast, the target—a structural deficit of less than 2% of national income in 2020-21—will be comfortably met by sticking to the current tax and spending plans, so there is about £25 billion of leeway to invest a little more in those important public services, while paying down the deficit in a responsible manner.

Mr Harper: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend about investing in public services. He will know that part of the reason why the Chancellor loosened the target a little in his first Budget last year was to build in some flexibility to deal with the headwinds that we may face in leaving the European Union, and some of the challenges, and I think that was right.

I was going to say—my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) has given me an excellent lead-in—that we can pay for our public services only by raising the money through economic growth, as he suggests, or by borrowing more, which I do not think would be sensible. It would damage the public finances, raise interest rates, as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, and put pressure on our hard-pressed constituents. Alternatively, we would have to raise taxes, which I do not think would be the right thing to do either.

When the Chancellor looks at the public finance position in his Budget, he needs to consider the growth forecast from the independent Office for Budget Responsibility—what tax revenues he is likely to have. He then needs to consider the pressures on public servants and public services. He needs to look at all the pressures across the piece and come to a balanced Budget judgment, weighing up all those things. Then we need to back him in those decisions. What we cannot do is have a particular story that goes around each week, or decide that something happens to be the flavour of the month, and discover at the time of the Budget that we have run out of money. That is not the way to run a sensible Government, and that is the message for the Chancellor.

I want finally to consider how we pay for things. I remind my right hon. and hon. Friends that in our manifesto we said that we wanted to keep taxes as low as possible, because taxes are levied on businesses that employ people and on individuals who work hard and face decisions about how to spend their money. We will always be the party that keeps taxes as low as possible, and we want to reduce taxes on businesses and on Britain's working families. We made it clear that we would deliver an increase in the personal allowance, that we would not increase value added tax, and that we would stick to our plan of reducing corporation tax, because that will bring investment and jobs to Britain. As I have already said in response to an intervention, that approach will raise more money for the public finances, not less. We need to stick with that plan and give the Chancellor the opportunity to act in that way.

Any Government worth their salt need to stick with sound public finances. That is how to get the growth, jobs and investment in the public services that we depend on. There are always more pressures on public spending than can be paid for. It is a difficult job for the Chancellor to balance those things. What we need to do, as his Conservative colleagues, is give him space to listen to the input—we can make our bids to him privately. He then needs to balance those things, taking everything into account, and come up with a balanced Budget judgment in the autumn. We need to back the Chancellor, which will mean we are backing our country and its growth prospects, and backing the prospects for jobs, growth and prosperity for all our constituents.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Front-Bench speakers at about 10.30. Given the number of hon. Members who want to speak, I suggest that they limit themselves to a maximum of four minutes, if not a little less. I will not apply a time limit at the moment. We shall see how we go.

9.55 am

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who made an interesting and succinct speech, as he always does. He has come to be known in this place as a deep thinker about all matters economic, and I hope that one day he will return to the Front Bench, from which he is sorely missed.

I feel somewhat like Custer at the battle of the Little Bighorn, as the Comanches come running towards me. I apologise to those Tories present, because I will pour cold water on some of the more political points raised by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. Over the past seven years the Government have been good at one thing—patting themselves on the back and congratulating themselves on what a great job they are doing with the economy. Even though so many families are more pessimistic than ever about the future, the Government still trade on the myth that they are overseeing a strong and robust economy. When they were elected in 2010, they were given a mandate alongside the Liberal Democrats to bring about change. They allowed people—intentionally, I believe—to believe that the deficit and the national debt were one and the same thing, and told the British people in 2010 that they would pay off the debt and bring the budget into surplus by 2015. It is now 2017, and they have failed.

Despite its being enshrined in legislation in October 2015, the Government have now abandoned their plan to achieve a budget surplus by 2019-20. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that the previous commitment will be replaced by a vague pledge to deliver a budget surplus as early as possible in the next Parliament. Since we have had a general election since that statement was made in November 2016, I imagine that that could happen in the next five years. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, even reaching that is likely to be difficult. The deficit this year is forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility to be £68.2 billion, or 3.5% of national income. That is high by historical standards. Over 60 years, from 1948 until the eve of the financial crash and associated recession, average UK Government borrowing was 1.9% of national income.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about closing the deficit, why has the Labour party, at every opportunity, thwarted every attempt to keep it under control?

Chris Evans: I admire the hon. Gentleman, as he knows; I know his constituency well. I believe that we said there was a rush to pay off the deficit; the former Prime Minister and the previous Chancellor started an unnecessary rush to pay off the debt. We said it needed to be slower. We were concerned about high unemployment and a double-dip recession. But for monetary policy, that might have happened.

After six years of austerity, the deficit this year will be higher than it was for 80% of the time in the 60 years before the financial crash, while debt is now at its

highest level as a proportion of national income since 1965-66. Is it any wonder that when the Tories tell the electorate “Trust us to pay off the deficit”, voters respond by taking their majority away? The Conservative party just do not get it. The electorate told them time and again that they wanted change, but they were given business as usual. Nearly 10 years after the financial crash of 2008, its legacy still weighs heavy on confidence and growth. By its very nature, it rocked financial institutions in this country. Suddenly, phrases such as “safe as houses” or “money in the bank” became laughable clichés. As the Labour Government rushed to bail out the banks and bring about a stimulus that was one of the largest in peace time, the Tories nodded their approval. It was not until much later that, for political purposes, they brought words such as “deficit denial” or “the age of austerity” into the political lexicon.

Sustained austerity has in the main been bad for the British economy. As the deficit fell from 10% to 3.5%, around a percentage point has been reduced from demand each year. The labour market has been unable to return productivity growth to anything resembling pre-crash levels. In June, the British Chambers of Commerce released its second quarterly economic forecast for this year, and the predictions do not make good reading. It forecast that, for the next few years, economic growth would underperform its historical average, falling to 1.3% next year and rising to only 1.5% in 2019. It also predicted that inflation would rise to a five-year high of 3.4% towards the end of the year. Interest rates are also expected to rise by 0.5% in the first quartile of 2018—much earlier than initially predicted. At the same time, there is a tax gap of £36 billion between expected and actual receipts in 2016. We can talk about tinkering with tax levels, but it means very little if we do not collect taxes effectively in the first place.

The Government have still not given any clarity on their plans for the post-Brexit world. The Government’s main tool to address inherent weakness in our economy has been monetary policy. Constraints on how low interest rates could go meant that the Bank of England had to buy gilts—so-called quantitative easing. That move, together with the cut in interest rates to their lowest possible level, has probably kept the lid on high unemployment, but it is only papering over the cracks. Listening to some of the speeches about how sunny the economic outlook is over the years during my time in the House, it has to be asked why people are not cracking open the champagne and singing, “Happy days are here again”? The reason is simple; people feel more anxious than ever, they view innovative technology with suspicion and they fear that jobs will be automated or lost. GDP can be a measure of the health of the Government’s spending, but it can never be a measure of people’s happiness, concerns, or worries.

Productivity has not recovered, and as a consequence, real wages are below what they were a decade ago—something no one alive has ever experienced before. The facts are stark. There is a 16% shortfall in the UK’s productive capacity. Monetary policy can only stabilise demand around the economy’s potential, it cannot increase it. Boosting long-term prosperity is firmly the job of the Government’s structural or supply-side policies—something that has been sorely lacking from the Tories over the past seven years.

Government policies influence investment in education and skills, capacity for research and development, the regulatory environment in which business operates, the flexibility of the labour market and—above all, in the light of Brexit—its openness to trade and investment. In the Queen’s Speech, the Prime Minister said that her Government would work to attract investment in infrastructure, so as to support economic growth. She also spoke of plans to spread prosperity and opportunity across the country.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to welcome record employment in our country?

Chris Evans: I admire the hon. Gentleman for the mischief he is trying to cause me. Of course, I will always welcome people being in jobs, but I am concerned about the inherent weakness in the economy, which is the lack of investment and the lack of an industrial strategy over the past seven years.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I hear the hon. Gentleman saying that the economy is not growing, but my memory of the statistics is that we are the second-fastest-growing economy in the developed world, after Germany. On what metric does the hon. Gentleman say that we are not a fast-growing or strong economy?

Chris Evans: The hon. Lady should have listened to my speech earlier—I do not know if she was on her iPhone or something—because I never said anything about growth. I spoke about productivity, which is 16% down. It has not returned to pre-crash levels, and the facts from the IFS bear that out. If the hon. Lady wants to challenge me on that, I am willing to take another intervention.

Vicky Ford: I understand that the hon. Gentleman was discussing productivity, but he also challenged the strength of the economy. The economic strength of this country is such that we are the second fastest-growing economy anywhere in the developed world, after Germany.

Chris Evans: I accept that we are not growing at the same rate as we have historically. That is the point I was making. I believe there is an inherent weakness in the economy; it has been over-reliant on monetary policy—quantitative easing, low interest rates. But I do not believe that there has been investment in the real economy. That is the point I am making and that is why productivity is down.

The Prime Minister has mentioned the industrial strategy, but it is still empty words. There is no insight or strategy for how the Government will attract investment.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman says that the industrial strategy is empty words. However, the industrial strategy has involved, for example, the biggest increase in research and development and science spending since 1979. How can he possibly say that those are just empty words? Those are real actions that will increase the trend rate of the growth of the economy.

Chris Evans: When productivity is down, those things are too little, too late. They should have been thought of after the financial crash, when the Government told us

[*Chris Evans*]

from the very beginning that they were going to rebalance the economy and invest in manufacturing. I remember the former Prime Minister even saying at one point that we were going to invest to become an economy that makes things rather than sells them. That has not happened, so it is a bit late in the day to be talking about this.

In the light of the report by the British Chambers of Commerce, it is so important, now more than ever, that the Government implement a strategy to attract investment and generate the economic growth that we all want to see. That is easier said than done in a globalised world. Too many people have been left behind by globalisation. However, globalisation is here, and that will not change. The financial crash was probably the first crisis of globalisation. The only way to address growth, higher inequality and rising insecurity is to build a globalisation that works for all.

Society has to redistribute some of the gains from new technology. Technology constantly evolves and can lead to rapid changes in production, and therefore reskilling must be a constant. In a job market subject to frequent radical changes, people's prospects rely solely on lifelong learning, which should be factored in by each and every employer. In the age in which we live, anyone can produce anything, anywhere. Someone sitting in their bedroom right now can broadcast across the world in minutes. They can sell to anyone at any time. We need to harness that entrepreneurial spirit. It should be the Government's intention to bring that about in a way that equips people with skills for the future.

We live in exciting and changing times. With the right level of investment in our people, the age of austerity can come to an end.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The Labour party manifesto had some rather alarming plans for renationalisation, which would have cost more than £100 billion. Can the hon. Gentleman tell us how that would be paid for?

Chris Evans: I thank the hon. Gentleman for interrupting me just as I entered my finishing flourish; I was trying to come to my rhetorical peak. There are inherent weaknesses in the former nationalised industries. As I was talking about before, people feel that they are being ripped off and have no control. They see energy companies squeezing them all the time, and something has to be done about that. Most people, and basic economics, ask why we would privatisate an industry that has no competition. That has been the problem, but that is a debate for another day.

I will finish, because I have spoken for far too long. I have no doubt that, with the right level of investment, the UK economy can seize the opportunities ahead of it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that we are very short on time and that there are a lot of Members who want to speak. I suggest that hon. Members keep their remarks to no more than three minutes, otherwise I will have to introduce a time limit after the next speaker.

10.7 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan—it is the first time I have had the opportunity to do so. I will keep my remarks very brief because I know a lot of hon. Members want to speak, and I will try not to repeat things that others have said already. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing the debate, which is of enormous significance as we consider the Government's progress since 2010 and where we go as we look forward to a strong economy for the future.

When the Government came to power in 2010, they immediately set about putting right and reducing the massive deficit they inherited from the Labour Government. The deficit has been brought down by three quarters after starting as the highest since records began. At that stage, one pound in every four spent by the Government was borrowed. That deficit has been brought down from 10% of GDP to 3%.

That matters a great deal, for two reasons, the first of which is that anything borrowed has to be paid back. It is a fallacy simply to think that there is a pot of money that can be borrowed and spent, but that there is never a day of reckoning. If the deficit is not dealt with by this Government or this generation, it will have to be dealt with by the generations that follow. It is not responsible—it is not something I wish to be a part of—to hand down to my children and to the children who follow us a debt that we were unwilling to consider repaying.

Secondly, there comes a point when the borrowing rate increases and becomes unsustainable. Owing to the cuts to the deficit that the Government have made, they now pay 1% on their 10-year gilts. That compares favourably with Italy, which pays 2%, or Portugal, which pays 2.9%. That has avoided tens of billions of pounds of extra debt payment.

Borrowing is not free. In the year 2014-15, about £34 billion was spent on servicing debt interest, which is about 4.6% of all Government spending. Depending on how it is managed, that is bigger than the transport budget and approximately equivalent to the defence budget. No one should be under any illusion that, in borrowing such amounts, our spending on debt interest is equivalent to that of a major Government Department of State.

Neil O'Brien: You are absolutely right—my hon. Friend is right—to point out that we are paying that much in debt interest payments. You will know that more than a quarter of our debt is held overseas, so by my calculations we are spending something like £10 billion a year to other countries for them to spend on their schools and hospitals. My constituents in Harborough will be shocked that we are spending that much to support public services overseas.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien) that he is supposed to address the Chair.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that powerful point. He is right that when we are paying debt interest overseas, we are paying money elsewhere when it could be spent in this country building up the economy and spent on our priorities.

The central point is that a strong economy is needed to fund strong services. It is all very well to have a long list of priorities on which we would like to spend. Let us be under no doubt that everybody Government Member wants strong public services. We want to increase spending, but that must be done in a responsible way. That money, in order to be spent, has to be raised. If public spending is not balanced, it leads to a weaker economy. That means less money to be spent on our public services, and it means that we are in a weaker position to withstand the next economic shock when it comes. In due course, there always will be a downturn in the economy and we need to be in a strong position to meet it when it comes. That is the overriding mistake made by the Labour Government.

Living within our means is not an ideological fixation. It is not simply a desire. It is a necessity to ensure that we can protect our public services and spend sensibly for this generation and for generations to come.

10.12 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing this debate. It was somewhat mischievous of him to comment on one side of the Chamber being empty—interestingly, the Government side was empty last week when we were debating WASPI women.

For far too long, balancing the public finances has generally been done on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: I will not, because Members have taken quite a long time. Despite several years of austerity, Her Majesty's Government continue to miss their targets on debt, deficit and borrowing. Quite simply, austerity has failed to rebalance our public finances, and we need to reassess and re-evaluate our approach.

The biggest contributor to a sluggish UK economy and the biggest threat to our public finances is the reckless hard Brexit currently being pursued by Her Majesty's Government. That has not been helped by Labour Members voting to give the Prime Minister a blank cheque by voting against single market membership only two weeks ago.

Scottish National party Members will continue to stand up not only for access to but membership of the single market and customs union. When we look at our public finances, we see a major trade deficit, which in the three months to April was £8.6 billion, up from £6.9 billion in the previous quarter. By turning our back on the single market and pursuing a hard Brexit, we risk delivering further shocks to our already precarious economy.

The UK economy grew by just 0.2% in quarter 1 of this year. In comparison, in the same quarter Scotland's economy grew four times faster. That was somewhat of a surprise, not least because colleagues in the Scottish Conservative party were briefing last week that Scotland was about to move into recession, which certainly did not happen.

We face difficult financial decisions in Scotland, not least because Scotland's budget faces a real-terms cut of £2.9 billion due to UK austerity. That figure of £2.9 billion is significant, because had Barnett consequentials been followed during the Government's grubby deal with the Democratic Unionist party, Scotland would have stood to receive £2.9 billion.

I want to move on and to some of my concerns about the deeply worrying consequences posed for Scotland by a hard Brexit. The stark reality is that Brexit threatens to cost the economy around £11 billion by 2030 and result in 80,000 fewer jobs compared with remaining within the EU. We understand and accept that, despite 62% of Scots voting to remain in the EU, we are leaving. However, the Scottish Government have sought to be reasonable and amicable, and have come forward with a compromise that would allow Scotland to remain within the single market. Unfortunately, those pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

We know that Her Majesty's Government are pursuing a reckless approach to the economy, with a hard Brexit coupled to an ideologically driven obsession with austerity. SNP Members believe it does not have to be like that. Cuts are a choice, not a necessity. During the recent general election campaign, we put forward a responsible and credible fiscal plan that would return a balanced budget by the end of the Parliament. However, in doing so, we would generate an additional £118 billion cumulatively over the next Parliament, with around £10 billion flowing to Scotland. Our fiscal plan would stabilise net borrowing at the level it was before the financial crash and see debt begin to fall as a share of GDP from 2019-20.

Ministers and Conservative Members regularly tell us how employment is high under this Conservative Government. What they do not say is that much of that is due to part-time work or, worse still, exploitative zero-hours contracts. Unstable and low pay is a worry for my constituents in the east end of Glasgow, with the Resolution Foundation estimating that the period 2011-2020 will be the worst decade for wage growth in 210 years. That is before we take into account the Government's con trick of the living wage, which will actively discriminate against under-25s.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: I will not, because of time pressures.

Austerity strangles the lifeblood out of an economy by exacerbating inequality. The Government's tax and welfare reforms disproportionately affect the least well-off. Charities have warned that current planned welfare cuts are set to drive a potential fall in incomes of 10% for the poorest third of working-age households and a rise in inequality not seen since the 1980s.

Mr Harper: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David Linden: In conclusion, let us have a debate about balancing public finances but let us be serious and not balance the public finances on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. I am going to apply a three-minute limit. That still might mean that not everybody gets in. It is for Members to police it and to go below three minutes—you will not be able to go above the three minutes.

10.17 am

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for securing this much-needed debate and for his excellent points.

I want to focus my comments on one issue only: income inequality, which the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) referred to. Almost a year ago today, the Prime Minister gave a statement on the steps of Downing Street in which she focused on her aim to make Britain a country that works for everyone by tackling deep-rooted injustices such as income inequality. That is one of the most pernicious issues facing our country, and it lies at the heart of our Prime Minister's vision for our country. In this Parliament, we are setting out the meaningful ways in which we will effect change.

One thing that came up time and again in my election hustings, and I am sure those of other hon. Members, was the idea of taxing the rich more to pay for all the things on which Opposition Members propose to spend money. In fact, the Leader of the Opposition has proposed that as a highly desirable option, which he thinks would lead to lower inequality in our country. However, far from having the desired effect, would that not have precisely the opposite effect?

Is it not a fact that, under the Conservative Government, the people who pay the highest taxes in actual and relative terms are the rich? In 2016-17, the richest 1% in our country are set to pay 27% of all income tax revenue, a higher proportion than under the Labour Government. The richest 5% will pay 38% of total tax. I welcome that. Never let it be said that the Conservatives shy away from taxing the rich. We do tax them, but we do it in a way that delivers real income to the Exchequer. Labour Members—if they were here—would do it in a way that damages the economy, hurts businesses and jobs, and results in tax hikes for ordinary hard-working people, including my constituents in Redditch. Is it not a fact that, under the Conservatives, people on lower incomes are paying less tax than they did in all the years of the Labour Government?

Mr Harper: I will be very brief, but I cannot let what the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said go unchallenged, which is why he did not give way to me. Over the years that the Conservatives have been in power, income inequality has reduced. The country has become more equal, not less. That does not support Opposition Members' arguments, which is why they do not want to hear it, but it is a fact of which Government Members should be very proud.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my right hon. Friend—he has managed to make my speech a bit shorter.

I will focus on the lower paid, hard-working earners. For 2017 to 2018, the personal allowance is being raised to £11,500, which means that the amount of tax-free income someone can earn will be more than 75% higher

than in 2010. That means more money in people's pockets to cope with the cost of living, because taking people out of tax has the same effect as giving them a pay rise. We have discussed the importance of giving pay rises to everybody, which I welcome. People are keeping more of what they earn.

I reiterate my right hon. Friend's comment that income inequality is in fact at a 30-year low. It continues to fall, and we want to see it go further. It is the Conservatives who are on the side of the lowest paid—we have taken them out of tax. We are on the side of those earning the minimum wage, and we are boosting their incomes with the national living wage. We are on the side of hard-working people, and we are stabilising the economy so that it creates jobs for people, and they can go to work and earn a decent living. It is the Conservatives who believe in fairness, because we have delivered the lowest levels of income inequality for 30 years, giving people a sense that our country works for everyone.

10.21 am

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing this debate. I just wish it was much longer, as do we all.

As my right hon. Friend knows, every morning we are admonished about having a desire to please, but it is a salutary warning. It is too easy to spend other people's money, particularly when it is future generations' money we are getting through. I have to take issue with the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans). He referred to the financial crisis and the stewardship of the economy under Lord Darling. It was a privilege to serve in the Treasury in that period. I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that no one was under any illusions that, no matter how tough the decisions to be made in 2008 and 2009, the real tough decisions and the real grinding work would happen in the 10 years that followed as we sorted out the fundamental problems left to us by the Labour Government.

A lot of good things have been said today, and I intend to speak briefly so that other good things can be said. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) referred to the level of debt interest payments and the cost of servicing that debt. We have done an extraordinary job as a Government of reducing the share of our deficit from 10% to 3% of GDP. That has still left us with a monumental debt pile, which we all recognise. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney referred to the cost of servicing that debt pile in terms of transport, but I think of it in terms of policing and schools—just to service that debt is equivalent to the amount of money we are spending on both.

We have to consider what would happen if in some ghastly, dreadful other world this country chose to elect a Government that had less of a reputation for fiscal competence and in international markets. Where would our blended interest rate go from then? If it was to the rates currently endured by Spain, Italy or Australia, we would be looking at an increase in our debt service level of 40%, 80% or 120%.

It does not end there. It does not end on the immediate fiscal impact, with the money having to be raised in tax or added to our debt pile. It would also come in the dynamic effects that would flow—it would come in

lower levels of confidence and investment and fewer jobs, meaning lower tax receipts, more borrowing, higher inflation and lower confidence. The cycle goes on.

The Labour manifesto was stuffed full of examples of desiring to please, and the impact on our economy would have been disastrous. Every pound that we borrow now and every pound added to the debt pile is a pound for future generations to pay off with interest. Every pound added to our already high levels of national debt reduces our ability to take sensible measures and make sensible fiscal interventions when the next cyclical downturn happens, as assuredly one day it will. Were we to fail in our generation to rebalance our books, it is the next generation that we would be failing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. The time limit will now reduce to two minutes.

10.24 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I had 90 seconds at the end of the Queen's Speech debate, as the last Government Member to speak, and I will continue that speech for these two minutes.

The point I made then was that austerity is not a choice; that is a facile argument. It is a mathematical reality determined by the size of the national debt, and most importantly, the future liabilities we are starting to accrue. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that in 50 years' time, public spending is expected at current prices to be £156 billion larger than it is today, which is the cost of the NHS plus £10 billion. We have to find that money somewhere or consign our children and grandchildren to terrible austerity.

There are two suggestions for where we find that money. The most important relates to productivity in the public sector. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, if the last Labour Government

"had managed to maintain the 'bang for each buck' at the level it inherited in 1997, it would have been able to deliver the quantity and quality of public services it delivered in 2007 for £42.5 billion less"—

that is equivalent to the defence budget. The enormous savings that come from better productivity cannot be underestimated.

The other part of this, which I feel most passionately about, comes from the debate that came up in the general election about care and the intergenerational covenant. It is a staggering fact that the value of equity in the homes of those over 65, according to Savills, is now £1.5 trillion and earned £26,000 last year for each pensioner household, compared with average national earnings of £27,000, or a graduate entering the workplace on £19,000, with no prospect immediately of getting on the housing ladder and no occupational pension, probably retiring at 75.

If people think we can put off that issue through parliamentary arithmetic, they are deluded. Economic arithmetic means that at some point in the future, as a mathematical certainty, whether we like it or not, the issue of equity for those who benefited from the housing

boom will come up. We have to decide whether we deal with it voluntarily or put it off until we are bankrupt and in desperation.

10.26 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): We can change many things in this House. We can pass and change many laws, but the laws we cannot change are those of arithmetic. No matter how big the abacus, no responsible person can ignore the size of our country's debt and the deficit we inherited. Our debt as a percentage of GDP was roughly 30% to 40% for decades, yet now, courtesy of the last Labour Government, compounded by a global recession, that debt is above 80% of GDP. Those figures alone should make it clear that borrowing more at this stage would be completely irresponsible.

How much does that debt cost us in interest payments? Currently we spend £48 billion servicing our debt. That is dead money. What else could we spend it on? There are many areas where we could use that extra cash. It is nearly half the NHS budget; that is a lot of doctors and nurses. It is more than our whole education budget; that is a hefty pay rise for teachers and more school facilities, with plenty of spare change.

I understand that many years of trying to live within our means is hard. However, the short-term happiness of spending will have dreadful consequences for our country's finances and make things even harder. It would be the height of irresponsibility to mortgage our future, and there is no moral case for bingeing on the nation's credit card, least of all when we are forcing others to pay the bill—namely, our children and grandchildren. As anybody who has ever got themselves into credit card debt will understand, it is impossible to pay back the original debt when all your cash is taken paying off the interest payments alone.

That would set us back just at the point when all our leading indicators are heading in the right direction: we have seen a significant reduction in the deficit, which is down by two thirds; unemployment is the lowest it has been for 40 years; the minimum wage is up by 26%; pensions are protected; 1 million new businesses have been created since 2010; and we continue to invest more in our NHS and schools. Those are signs not of a country living under austerity but a nation starting to prosper, despite the dreadful debt burden handed to us by the last Government.

10.28 am

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing this really important debate.

Everyone who argues for a splurge on public spending needs to explain where that money will come from. It comes either from increasing taxes or from more borrowing. If we increase taxes, that dampens the economy and takes away people's hard-won earnings. If we borrow, it drives up interest rates. At the moment, we are very fortunate, in that we have hard-won respectability in the financial markets, which has kept interest rates incredibly low. At a time when the Bank of England is warning banks to increase their capital and about the level of household debt, the risks of increased interest rates to

[Charlie Elphicke]

households and mortgage holders are great indeed. We must be mindful of any idea of increasing public spending, given the constraints.

When it comes to tax, we need to look at reforming the system and particularly at how taxation of multinationals works. Amazon pays very little tax in this country and hardly any business rates, yet it is killing our high streets. That is not fair. We need to rebalance the tax system to make a level competitive playing field, not just on our high streets but across the piece in business, so that we have more fairness and all businesses can succeed and compete equally.

Finally, we have a productivity challenge. We must get more investment into the real economy, which is why there should be a much greater focus on both sides of the House. We owe it to all our citizens to do all we can to get the nation a pay rise.

10.30 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Economies that lose control of their finances lose control of their destiny and that is why it is absolutely right to focus on living within our means. Conservative Members believe that the best way to do that is to power up an enterprise economy. We all hate austerity; we believe in prosperity. We believe in creating businesses and helping them to grow and expand to create the wealth to fund public services so that we can see them grow and develop.

We must be conscious that as a country we need not only to live within our means but to help our lower paid workers to have the means to live. I am proud of what the Government have done with the national living wage because we want well-paid jobs and decent public services. Productivity is the absolute key to higher wages, often for lower paid workers—a good movement, “Be the Business”, has been launched by Charlie Mayfield today. Technical education is at the heart of that, so the Government are putting it to the front. Dealing with extortionate housing costs in London and the wider south-east is also key to the productivity issue, because high housing costs are a drag on the economy. Our national productivity infrastructure fund, focusing on transport, digital, research, investment and housing, is absolutely the right way forward. We should have common purpose across the House; we must all focus on driving up the country’s productivity.

I am proud that, as a result of the hard things that the Government have had to do, the richest 1% are paying more in tax than happened under Labour and that income inequality is at its lowest since 1986—according to the Office for National Statistics, not the Conservative research department. Finally, the Government have taken 75 measures to raise an extra £140 billion in tax.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I will now call the Front-Bench spokesmen. If they take eight or nine minutes each, Mr Harper will have one minute at the end.

10.32 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be in Westminster Hall with you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I thank the right hon. Member for

Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for bringing this debate to the House. It is an important debate to have. It highlights the fact that a huge number of Conservative Members live on a different planet from the rest of us. In particular, the speech of the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) did not seem to have any link with reality as I and my constituents know it.

Conservative Members are putting out economic soundbites that could easily have been lifted from the Conservative party’s manifesto, but that is not the lived experience of real people. That is not what is happening or what the just-about-managings are facing. They do not feel like their wages have gone up; they do not feel like the reduction in tax credits is at all helpful. I get that the personal allowance has been raised; that is brilliant and I am pleased that it has happened. I also get that the minimum wage has been raised, but it is not to a level that people can live on. That is the problem. It is still a minimum wage and it is not applicable to younger people in the job market. They may have families and housing costs—the same costs that those of us who are over 25 have—yet they are not worth the same wage as others. I am frustrated by the debate because I cannot believe that Members can spill this nonsense.

When the Chancellor gave the spring Budget statement, he reckoned that inflation would be 2.4% in 2017. Actually, in the 12 months to May, it was sitting at 2.9%. The forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility for earnings growth in 2017 was 2.6%. If inflation continues to grow at 2.9% and wages continue to grow at 2.6%, there will soon be a serious problem, particularly for households that are struggling with increasing levels of household debt. The Bank of England is concerned about the increase in household debt, which is at its highest since 2008. This is a real problem for families, especially when they will see their real wages eroded.

Jeremy Quin: Is the hon. Lady proposing higher Government spending, higher inflation and higher interest rates?

Kirsty Blackman: I was literally about to come to that. There are three ways for the Government to increase spending on public services: higher taxes, higher borrowing or higher growth. Those are not my words but those of the Chancellor, yet whenever an Opposition hon. Member suggests increasing public spending or simply not reducing it, Conservative Members say, “Oh, you will have to put up taxes.” As the Chancellor said, there are three ways to increase public spending.

Some of the things that Conservative Members said are a concern. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said that, according to the Resolution Foundation, 2011-21 will be the worst decade for pay growth for 210 years. That is quite some statistic.

It is interesting that the Government talk about how wonderfully they are doing for young people. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said that those born in the 1980s have by their early 30s accumulated half as much wealth as those who were born in the 1970s. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean mentioned the IFS as a respected think-tank, and it won an award last night. If we are talking about mortgaging our future and concerns for the future, the lack of wealth accumulation compared

with previous generations is a real problem, including for millennials. The way the Government are dealing with it is not working.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: Not just now; I am conscious of time.

The Government are increasing spending on infrastructure. A recent report from the Institute for Government said that

“weak processes are leading to the wrong projects and contested decisions, wasting both government time and taxpayer money.”

We agree that infrastructure spending is a good thing, but we believe that the processes in place and the Government’s choices are poor and could be much better directed to infrastructure projects that will increase economic growth and create, as the Chancellor said, better spending on public services by growing the economy rather than simply cutting things or increasing taxes.

10.38 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship today, Ms Ryan. I welcome the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to his position. I have no doubt we will have many of these debates in future. I thank the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for tabling this debate on this important issue and on the need for Governments to balance the books. I also thank hon. Members for inviting me to the 1922 Committee. It is a pleasure. That was a joke—give it a bit of thought and try to keep up.

It is worth looking at the Conservative Government, in which the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean was a Minister for six years when all those decisions were made. Since coming to office, the Conservative Government have consistently failed to balance the books and to abolish the deficit, despite continually pledging to do so.

Andrew Selous: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: May I get further into my speech? I will then be happy to give way.

First, it was promised that the deficit would be abolished by 2015. Then it was pushed back to 2020. We have now been told by the Chancellor that it is likely that it will not be abolished until 2025. The phrase used in the Conservative manifesto—hon. Members will appreciate that I read it avidly—was

“by the middle of the next decade”.

A full 10 years after the former Chancellor originally pledged to do it, and a full 15 years since the Conservatives started making the promise, the books still will not be balanced.

Andrew Selous: Does the hon. Gentleman think that our task of reducing the deficit would have been easier or more difficult if we had acceded to the Labour party’s continual requests for more spending and its opposition to every single reduction in spending that we put through?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I am not going to get into hypotheticals or “what ifs” in this debate. We are looking to the future. That was promised. [*Interruption.*] I am sorry; I did not hear what was said. That was promised, but the Conservatives failed to deliver. I do not think that there is a case in modern political history of a British Government so regularly failing to meet their own economic targets.

Royston Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Dowd: In a moment, if I may.

A Government can balance the books in many ways, and very many difficult decisions have had to be taken during the past seven years. No one doubts that. However, this Government chose the path of austerity over the long-term prosperity of everyone in the country. Some hon. Members have said that that was not a choice, but it was. The Government chose to cap public sector wages and to cut local council budgets by 40% and in certain cases by as much as 60%, with more on the way.

James Cartlidge: Does the hon. Gentleman remember that the 2010 Labour manifesto promised a 1% cap on public sector pay? Does he think that that was because the Labour party does not support public sector workers, or because it was the right thing to do given the circumstances of the economy?

Peter Dowd: The reality is that that pay cap has now been institutionalised. It has been there for virtually a decade and it will continue. The Government have also chosen to underfund the NHS and cut £4.6 billion from social care, and they now threaten huge cuts for schools. However, despite those huge and deeply unfair budget cuts to public services, the Government have been able to find £70 billion of tax cuts for those who need them least of all.

Throughout the election campaign, which I might add is a happy memory, we were told that there was no magic money tree that could be used to solve the nation’s financial problems. If anything was magic about it, it was that it turned into a cherry tree, and the Prime Minister proceeded to pick the cherries and hand at least £1 billion-worth to the Democratic Unionist party to keep her in No. 10.

Alex Chalk: Under the previous Labour Government, low-paid workers were required to pay tax on earnings above about £6,500. The position now is that they do not pay it on earnings up to about £11,500. Is it not a positive thing to take low-paid people out of tax? Does the hon. Gentleman not welcome that?

Peter Dowd: Yes, I welcome anything that helps the low-paid, but that is not the only element in someone’s life chances or in people’s prosperity. The reality is that there was a mendacity in the deal with the DUP that will take a long time to be wiped clean.

Similarly, the Chancellor, in the spring Budget, was able to find a temporary £2 billion to backfill the cuts to social care and then further money to do a U-turn on raising national insurance contributions for the self-employed. There was a bit of cherry-picking there as well. It is clear that the Tories can find money when it is needed to oil the palms of certain people in order to

[*Peter Dowd*]

assist the Prime Minister in retaining the tenancy of No. 10, and it is all dressed up as being in the national interest. That is not real and it is not acceptable.

When it comes to the long-term health of our economy and a wage rise for dedicated nurses and teachers, there is no money. They will have to continue with the pay they have, year in, year out. The truth is that austerity is not a necessity, but has been used by the Government to fulfil the ideological aim of shrinking the state beyond comprehension and privatising public services. That is a choice that the Government made. They should simply acknowledge that.

There are countless examples of countries taking a different approach. One hon. Member referred to Greece, and another referred to Portugal. The Government of Portugal, our oldest ally, have reduced the country's deficit faster than us, but simultaneously they have restored state pensions, wages and working hours to pre-bail-out levels, and they managed that without crippling austerity. When we use examples, let us have a spread of international examples.

The well-off have done much better in austerity Britain. Meanwhile, those in the public sector have not seen their wages increase. The richest 100 families in the UK have seen their wealth increase by £55.5 billion. The Public Accounts Committee has reported that, while income tax for all taxpayers has risen by 9% under this Government, income tax receipts from high-net-worth individuals have fallen by 20% since 2009-10. That is typical of this Government's approach: those who had nothing to do with the global financial crisis—the bulk of low and middle-income households—are made to pay the price of austerity through slashed services, increased taxes and falling wages, while the richest in society and big corporations get greater tax benefits. The old chestnut that we are all in this together is still trotted out.

Rachel Maclean: I made this point in my speech, to which I refer the hon. Gentleman. Does he not agree that the richest 1% in our country are set to provide 27% of all income tax revenue in 2016-17, and that that is a higher proportion than it was under the Labour Government?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Lady made that point before, and I will repeat the point that I have just made. The claim is that we are all in this together, but Newcastle University has showed that, while my constituents saw a £195 per head reduction in spending by my local authority between 2010 and 2015, the constituency of the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean had cuts of only half that amount. If we are all in it together, is that fair or reasonable? It is not reasonable. Of course we need to balance the books, but doing it fairly rather than by cherry-picking is crucial. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has reported that for the Government to reach their target, they will have to find an additional £15 billion-worth of spending cuts or tax rises.

There is another question that we must ask ourselves. If this issue is so important, why are we waiting for the Finance Bill? We have waited and waited for the Finance Bill. I hope we get it this side of Christmas—we might get it next Pancake Thursday. I hope we get it on the Floor of the House so that we can debate it.

We can either carry on with the redundant approach of industrial-size spending cuts for most people and tax cuts for the rich and corporations, leading to an economy in the doldrums and falling household incomes, or we can start investing in our country, ensure that everyone pays their fair share, and use a growing economy to help to balance the public finances. We need a real long-term economic plan, without magic cherry trees, without bungs and smoke and mirrors, and without a Prime Minister who barely has the support of her Cabinet, let alone her party, and certainly not the country. We need a long-term economic plan for the many, not the few, and given the state of the Tory party under the Prime Minister, I do not think that that is far away.

10.48 am

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for securing this extremely important debate and for the impassioned and meticulous way—we have grown used to that in his case—in which he dealt with some of the most important issues that our nation faces.

Many hon. Members have this morning gone back to 2010, as is right and proper, and set the debate in that context. Let us remind ourselves that in 2010 the deficit was 9.9% of GDP. To put that in context, the last time the Labour party put us into very deep and troublesome economic waters was in 1976, when the figure was somewhat lower but still led to the then Chancellor, Denis Healey, having to go cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund because this country was bust. That is the perilous background.

Over the past seven years we have made extremely good progress. We have reduced the deficit by three quarters and, according to OBR forecasts, are probably about two years ahead in terms of the interim targets that we have set and that have been discussed in this debate. One of the most spiriting aspects of the debate on the Government side of the Chamber has been the focus that was rightly placed on our huge economic achievements. Let us not forget that employment is at a record high, there are more women in employment now than at any other time in our history, unemployment is at its lowest level since the mid-1970s and, as many Members have rightly pointed out, we have sustained levels of economic growth that other members of the G7 would be proud of and wish to achieve.

However, as many Members have said, we cannot duck the fact that our level of indebtedness, which will peak at the end of this financial year at 89% of GDP, is too high. It is unsustainable. It is not just a burden on future generations, as has been pointed out, but means that we are vulnerable to external economic shocks. We need to get that level down.

Alex Chalk: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a sobering fact that in 2007 Greece had a debt to GDP ratio of 100%? The fact that ours is close to 90% means that we have to take this matter very seriously for our national security and that of future generations.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we do not start to see the figure coming down, it can only bode ill for the future. That is why we are so determined to get it down.

Turning to the contributions that have been made, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean made important points about our record on growth and jobs, about the threat of interest rate hikes if we fail to get on top of our debt and about keeping taxes low, particularly for our businesses. Many Members have made the point that as we have reduced corporation taxes the actual tax yield has increased, which rather suggests that the Opposition's policy of raising them would be counterproductive in every sense. He made very important points about public sector pay. Let us not forget that this is not just about controlling public sector pay and spending, but about preserving jobs. The OBR reckons that by sticking to our plans we are protecting about 200,000 jobs in the public sector. When we talk about the 10,000-plus more nurses and 10,000-plus more doctors in the NHS, one of the reasons we have them is that we have given ourselves the room to afford them.

If I may, I will turn now to the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who made an impassioned attempt to take on the powerful arguments from the Government side. He is somewhat outnumbered. He suggested that he was like Lieutenant Custer. Of course, at Custer's last stand, which was in 1876 at the battle of the Little Bighorn, unfortunately Custer was annihilated: he lost five companies, two of his brothers, a nephew and a brother-in-law to boot. It is remarkable that the hon. Gentleman is still standing after the onslaught from the hordes on our side of the Chamber today.

The hon. Gentleman made one point about the tax gap. He bemoaned the fact that, at £36 billion, it is higher than we would like it to be. That is absolutely true, but what he did not mention is that it represents 6.5% of the tax that we raise and is at the lowest level for very many years. As another hon. Member pointed out, since 2010 we have had about 55 new tax avoidance measures that in total have raised no less than £140 billion, which is three times the size of the deficit we face.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) delivered the essential truth that borrowing must be repaid and the intergenerational unfairness of failing to do so. He made important points about the cost of servicing our debt and that if we lose the confidence of financial markets, those costs will rocket, to our detriment. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) referred to Brexit as an ideological obsession, but I say no, actually: it is respecting the democratic will of the people. Although I, probably like him, was on the other side of that argument.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) made some very important points. The Opposition always say that we are looking after the wealthiest in society, but the truth is a long way from that. Some 27% of tax is paid by the wealthiest 1% in this country. A statistic that could also have been used is that the wealthiest 3,000 people in our country pay as much tax as the poorest 9 million. We are doing a huge amount on the issue of income equality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) made an impassioned speech in which he referred to the importance of keeping interest rates low by keeping on top of the debt. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) finished his contribution on the Queen's Speech debate today, and I am glad that

he did because he made some important points, particularly on productivity, and quite rightly referred to our £23 billion productivity investment fund.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) gave a powerful speech and referred, I think, to the shadow Secretary of State for Education's performance on "The Andrew Marr Show" on Sunday, when the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) referred to Labour having a large abacus. I have to say that my jaw hit the Stride sofa when I heard her say that it would cost about £100 billion to wipe out student debt and that this was something they were looking at.

Mr Harper: The other point that the shadow Education Secretary made was putting her leader straight when she admitted that more working-class children were able to go to university with tuition fees and that it is simply not correct to keep asserting what he says, which is that fewer had done so. The fact that she put her leader right was spot on.

Mel Stride: As ever, my right hon. Friend is entirely correct.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) made important points about retaining the confidence of financial markets, and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about the importance of productivity, technical education, infrastructure, housing and all those elements, which matter.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) did at least welcome the personal allowance increases that we have implemented. They are now at £11,500 compared with about £6,500 in 2010, and will increase to £12,500 over the coming period. She made various comments about pressures on pay and wage growth, but one fact that I will share with her is that those in full-time work on the minimum wage have actually seen pay boosted by £1,400 a year going back to 2010. That is an achievement that this Government should be rightly proud of.

I very much welcome the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) to his place and look forward to a constructive engagement over the weeks, months and years of this Government. He said that he has read the Conservative party manifesto. I urge him to read it again and again and to learn from it. I am afraid that even though he has read it, he has failed to explain how to square more spending and spending, taxing and taxing and borrowing and borrowing with future sustainable economic success.

May I finish with one overall observation? The Opposition are very keen at every turn to say that our commitment to what they call "austerity" and what I call "living within our means" is some form of harsh, uncaring cruelty. Surely the cruellest cut of all is when a politician struts the stage telling the audience that which they most dearly wish to hear, but knowing in his heart that he has no way of delivering it—knowing in his heart that what he suggests will lead to financial and economic ruin. When we look at that situation, what question do we have to ask? We have to ask: who will be most hurt if we go back to the days of 1976? The answer is the most vulnerable—the poorest—because they are the least nimble and the least well-resourced to get out of the way of the damage. They are the people who lose their jobs and cannot cope. They are the

[*Mel Stride*]

people who see interest rates on their mortgages go through the roof, and struggle to pay as a consequence. As many Members have also said, the others who suffer are the young and the as yet not born—those who end up being saddled with the debt of the profligacy of our generation and have to pay it down themselves.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean for securing this debate. We must stay the course. We must make the hard choices. We must make it the first priority of this Government to have a responsible stewardship of our public finances.

10.59 am

Mr Harper: I am particularly grateful to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for closing his speech so excellently, because it leaves us with this one thought: balancing the public finances and having sound public finances is not an academic exercise; it is about enabling growth and jobs and allowing us to protect the most vulnerable in society, allowing the investment in public services, as my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) set out, and making sure that we can deliver on those important promises. Those who do not want to live within their means—the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) spent a lot of money in his speech but did not set out how he could save it—would disappoint people, let them down and fail them. That is not a mistake that we are going to make.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Social Inequality (Children's Centres)

11 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of children's centres in tackling social inequality.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. This issue is close to my heart. I am a secondary school teacher—at least, I used to be—and a primary school governor, and I have a burning desire to ensure that every child, no matter what their background, gets the best possible start in life. I keep reading that the Government agree, but where is the consultation on children's centres that we were promised in late 2015? A recent ministerial written answer said that the details will be published in due course. I start with a simple plea: please do not wait. We are days away from the summer holiday. In new, young lives, one year without intervention squanders many years of potential rewards.

I will make the case for why children's centres are worth investing in. The accelerating demise of access to children's centres across the country over the last seven years is one of the saddest outcomes of austerity. The evidence showed that they worked. If we are serious about creating a society where every child fulfils their potential, we need to get serious about breaking cycles of deprivation. We must not just listen to the evidence but act on it.

It is a sad fact that a child's parents' circumstances remain the best predictor of how that child will do as an adult. Well-respected organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children have presented evidence over many years showing that, if we want to break that cycle and create a fairer society, we must not only focus on the bottom 5% but cast a much wider net to avoid stigmatisation and build community resilience.

Every single one of the children's centres in my constituency closed last year. In fact, Oxfordshire County Council set out in 2013 to close all 44 children's centres in Oxfordshire, explicitly to save £8 million from the early intervention budget as part of a £22.5 million saving across the department as a whole. Following a big grassroots campaign, the Liberal Democrats proposed a £1 million transition fund, which was added to a cross-party budget in 2014. It has led to support for 29 community-led schemes, including in Kidlington, Cutteslowe, Botley and soon South Abingdon. However, they will provide only some of the services previously provided by the children's centres, and one is run entirely by volunteers—I thank those volunteers especially for their hard work and service. There is no clear plan for what will happen after three years, and no long-term, sustainable solution.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady will know that I have some involvement as Chair of the Select Committee on Education at the time that children's centres were established. She is right: all the research shows that early interventions such as Sure Start and children's centres are the answer, but up and down the country, children's centres have closed, and there is no policy and no money for early years intervention. I am glad that she is taking up the cudgels.

Layla Moran: These stories demonstrate why it was a big mistake to remove the ring fence from the Sure Start budget. What we have seen across the country is that the seemingly more urgent issues of older children, such as behaviour management and preventing teenage pregnancy and drug use, win out. The older a child gets, the harder it is to intervene, and the more expensive the interventions become. Given the difficult choices and the reality of cuts, it is no wonder that measures provided by children's centres have not been given the prominence that they deserve. After all, those children have yet to impact others.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. Clearly, there is a lot of evidence that investment in the early years is good for children's future life chances, but does she also agree that the issues are not entirely mutually exclusive? Unwanted pregnancies and the issues facing single-parent families can be dealt with through effective interventions linked to children's centres. They work well. That is an important point for investment.

Layla Moran: I agree entirely. Joined-up thinking in early intervention is important.

Parents tell me that children's centres are a lifeline. The services that they provide, such as parenting support and breastfeeding and baby health advice, are valued by many, but almost as important is the sense of community that they create. Families who would never normally interact bond over the common challenge of making it through the day with a delightful but occasionally demanding toddler. How many parents have met friends for life at Stay and Play? It takes a whole community to achieve such aims, and there should be no stigma in asking for help.

In the past, the Government have accused those who raise the issue of being obsessed with the number of buildings. I am not, but I am obsessed with outcomes and access, and I can tell the Minister that we have a problem, especially with access. The impact on access comes from a double whammy: the remaining centres are far apart, and local transport links have been reduced. The convenience of getting to a site is a key factor for the families who need the services the most. I believe that we are at risk of leaving behind the same families that the Government purport to want to target.

I met a lovely woman a few weeks ago in Kidlington who explained that the new centre there has reopened but on a different site, and that it offers fewer services than the original centre. She had recently given birth to her seventh child, in a family that already included two sets of twins—I told her I thought she was a saint. Both she and her partner work full-time to support them all, but they are just getting by. Because the centre has moved out of walking distance and there is no direct bus link, she feels she can no longer get there. She said, “I can't face the journey, and also when I get there, they can't cater for everyone. I used to be able to go and there was something for all of us as a family to do. I really love to go, but it's just too much hassle.”

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Lady is being generous. Did she see the Children's Commissioner's report, launched yesterday, on how many children in this country are

vulnerable on all the criteria? Will she please talk to the Children's Commissioner about her campaign? At the moment, there are so many vulnerable children out there, and given the cuts in local government finance, local governments are unable to run proper children's services?

Layla Moran: I imagine she was quite busy with her seven children, but I will encourage her to do so.

One anecdote should not policy make. As motherhood and apple pie as this all sounds, I believe that education policy should be firmly evidence-based, so let us consider that. More needs to be done to ensure that all services provided by children's centres are evidenced and effective. I applaud the work of the Early Intervention Foundation as one of many organisations adding to that body of evidence. We need much more of it. I also believe that all staff should be well-trained and properly qualified, and that allowances need to be made for differences in population. What works in one setting does not always work in another. We need to give credit to the professionals who can make an in-depth judgment, in the moment, of what works for the families in front of them.

The Government's own evidence shows that interventions for one to three-year-olds play a vital role in life chances, especially for the poorest children. The Oxford University children's centres study that was instigated by the Department for Education reported last year. It backed up what countless studies before it had showed: the benefit of interventions such as baby health and parenting support. Not only do they give value for money by improving outcomes for families as a whole; down the line, they help to reduce the chances of bad behaviour or smoking and raise educational attainment. The study further extrapolated that interventions will reduce joblessness and raise incomes for children in the future. What is there not to love?

As we have seen in Oxfordshire, the problem is that there is no budget. We need real long-term thinking at central Government level. The results of these interventions will not be seen again by the Exchequer until the children themselves start to pay it back in decades to come, but in my view it is worth the wait. Part of the answer is money. Hon. Members ask where it will come from. Frankly, it will come from the future. We borrow to invest in our own finances at home to reap rewards later, and the same principle applies. There is no single magic wand, but several magic wands waved early enough can make a big difference.

I look forward to the Minister's reply and to contributions from colleagues. In my view, nothing is more important than the wellbeing of the next generation. Children's centres are a proven and cost-effective way of promoting just that. Let us give our children everything we can and invest in them now, as a down payment on a more equal and fairer society in future.

11.11 am

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am very pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this incredibly important debate.

Tackling inequality is an absolute priority for the Government. I am pleased to have the opportunity to set out our position on the valuable contribution that

[*Mr Robert Goodwill*]

children's centres can make to the lives of disadvantaged children. I reassure the hon. Lady that I, too, have a burning desire to help these children. The Government are committed to improving social mobility and extending opportunity to all.

Children's centres can play a very important role in offering families access to a wide range of flexible local services. I was fortunate enough to visit a fantastic children's centre in my Scarborough constituency not so long ago, where I saw for myself how important children's centre services can be to families with young children. Indeed, all three children's centres in my constituency are still open. I was interested to hear from families and staff there that the people they really want to help are not in the children's centres—they are the people who do not engage and do not see the advantage of coming. One of my tasks in my new role is to ensure that we can get to those families who are not in the children's centres and in some cases are not even taking up the free childcare that is available. They are probably at home watching daytime television and do not see the importance of the home learning environment, or indeed the importance of taking up the offer that is there from this Government.

Children's centre services can include early years provision, child and family health services, information, advice, training and employment services for parents, and social services for those parents who need extra support.

Dr Poulter: On improving the offer for people who are among the most disadvantaged and most in need of support and help, does the Minister agree that there is a certain fragmentation when it comes to joining up the work of health visitors and family nurses, who support some very disadvantaged families, with the opportunities available in children's centres, which support some equally disadvantaged families?

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend makes a very reasonable point that relates not just to children, but to the elderly: health and social services do not necessarily speak to each other or work together as much as they might want to. However, I pay tribute to the tremendous work of health visitors, particularly when new babies are born and families need assistance.

Mr Sheerman: I welcome the Minister to his role. I do not want to be nasty to him on his first outing, but he mentioned people watching daytime television. I have to say that many of the people we are talking about are trying to keep their lives together by doing three jobs on zero-hours contracts rather than watching daytime television. How many children's centres are still there? How many were there in 2010, how many were there in 2015, and how many are there now? That is the crucial point: they are closing all over the country, especially in the areas of greatest deprivation. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Mr Goodwill: I should make a particular point about the offer that is available from this Government. We are improving the amount of childcare available. The point I made about daytime television was a point made by the staff at the children's centre I visited. The issue that

the hon. Gentleman should look at, particularly in respect of those working, is the offer coming forward in September for 30 hours of childcare for those in work. It will be a great opportunity for those who have been juggling work and childcare responsibilities. Indeed, many people will now be able to work during office hours, so to speak. Many families have had the problem of the husband and wife passing in the doorway at 6 in the evening when the husband returns from work and the wife has to go out to do additional—

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister give me the numbers at some stage?

Mr Goodwill: Yes, I will. The position is not as bad as the hon. Gentleman points out. Let me give him some figures on childcare centres. Oxfordshire County Council had to close 41 of its children's centres in the first quarter, including several in the constituency of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon. However, according to information supplied by local authorities, there were 2,447 children's centres and an additional 735 linked sites—a total of 3,182 children's centre sites—at the end of May 2017. Some 457 children's centres had closed since 2010, and 14 new centres had opened.

I hope those figures clarify the matter. There had been some confusion in cases where a number of sites had been operated by one provider. Those should not be counted as closures, because those sites are still open.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): On a positive note for the provision of children's services in Oxfordshire, does the Minister join me in welcoming the council's development of a new service for children that will combine children's social care and early intervention, so that there is one seamless service?

Mr Goodwill: Yes, absolutely. It is about providing a joined-up service, and enlightened local authorities understand that. They also need to ensure that the additional offer and the additional money going into childcare—more than £6 billion by 2020—dovetail with their own provision.

My next point follows on from that. Children's services do not have to deliver all their services themselves. Indeed, they deliver many of them through local statutory, voluntary, community and private sector partners. The context in which children's centres operate has changed since they were established. Funding for children's services, including children's centres, gives local authorities the freedom to decide how best to target resources and respond flexibly to local need.

We believe that it is up to local authorities to decide how to organise and commission services from children's centres in their areas. Local authorities are best placed to understand local needs and how best to meet them, which does not always have to be through a children's centre building. For example, the Government have established the troubled families programme to support those with multiple problems. Responsibilities around public health for under-fives now sit with local authorities.

Dr Poulter: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I congratulate him, as I should have done earlier, on his new position. The point about troubled families is concerning for all hon. Members present, given the

difficult financial position that local authorities find themselves in. The level of provision is left to local decision making, but local authorities in difficult times often provide only the statutory minimum. There is a real challenge here, so what will the Minister do about it? How will he link up the good work done in early years by health visitors with what happens afterwards? Many disadvantaged families are losing out, which is affecting the children as well as the families themselves.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Order. Interventions need to be pithy.

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend makes another very reasonable point. Indeed, one of the challenges in our opportunity areas, where we are particularly focusing on disadvantage and how we can close the attainment gap, is considering how we can make early interventions with those hard-to-reach families, many of whom do not take up the childcare offer that is available—15 hours of childcare are available for disadvantaged two-year-olds. Indeed, for those in work—many of these families are in work despite having difficulty in making ends meet—the 30 hours available from September will be a great fillip.

Mr Sheerman: Before the Minister moves on from that point, will he allow me to make one more intervention?

Mr Goodwill: Yes, by all means.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister is a good, honest Yorkshireman—I know him to be one—so will he give me a straight answer to a question? He knows that the Children's Commissioner made that announcement to which I referred. There was no Government Minister at the launch of the commissioner's report on Monday, and I cannot understand why. Regarding all these vulnerable children, we know that the troubled families programme has been a disaster. What have the Government learned from that and what are they going to do to react to the commissioner's report, which, as I say, was launched only this Monday?

Mr Goodwill: I met the commissioner the week before and we discussed some of the points that she has made. Indeed, her work is very valuable in feeding into what this Government are doing and will continue to do in future to address the problem. As I have already said, we have introduced 15 hours a week of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds and the diversity of childcare provision means that children's centres play less of a role in delivering childcare themselves.

I am sure hon. Members agree that it is vital that every child, regardless of their background, is given the opportunity to reach their full potential. We know that the first few years of a child's life are critical to shaping their future development. We also know that high-quality pre-school education reduces the effects of multiple disadvantage on later attainment, and on progress in both primary and secondary school. We recognise the crucial importance of early years education. With two fifths of the attainment gap embedded by the age of five, improving outcomes for our most disadvantaged children remains a top priority for this Government.

The evidence shows that all children benefit from a high-quality pre-school experience, but disadvantaged children see additional benefits that continue beyond school. Children from less advantaged backgrounds can be up to 19 months behind in their learning by the time they start school. That is simply unacceptable. We want to close this gap. High-quality learning from the age of two can help us to do so.

This Government have invested heavily in childcare and early years education. By 2020, we will spend a record £6 billion per year on childcare. We will also invest an additional £1 billion per year by 2020 in the provision of free childcare entitlements. In response to concerns from providers, we have increased the average funding rate for disadvantaged two-year-olds from £5.09 per hour to £5.39 per hour. The early years pupil premium continues to provide over £300 per eligible child, and we have also committed to provide supplementary funding of around £55 million per year for maintained nursery schools until 2020.

It is fantastic that more and more children are benefiting from that support. Currently, 97% of four-year-olds and 93% of three-year-olds are accessing funded early education. In addition, I welcome the figures that were published just last week showing a further increase in the proportion of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds accessing funded early education, which now stands at 71%. Nevertheless, I am happy to work with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon to increase that figure, including in her constituency.

Mr Sheerman: That is a deluge of statistics and information, which I very much appreciate—all Members who are here today will be grateful for them and we will all want to trawl through them. However, has the Minister discussed the present situation with the National Day Nurseries Association, which is a very lively organisation that is based in my constituency of Huddersfield? Its staff are very wise, so will he please meet them very soon to discuss early years provision?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—we have a deluge of delivery for our young children. I am very proud that we are stepping up to the mark in that regard. I would be more than happy to meet his constituents in Huddersfield to discuss that. My wife used to run a pre-school playgroup and then went on to work as a classroom assistant, so I know from experience within the family how important this type of provision is—if it helps at all, my mother was a primary headteacher.

What is more, the 30 hours programme, which will roll out nationally in September, will support around 390,000 working parents with the cost of childcare. I am pleased that 100,000 working parents have already registered for this additional childcare. I encourage working parents who have not already registered to do so before the deadline at the end of August.

Although children's centres themselves provide just 1% of funded early education places for three and four-year-olds, they can help to identify and support families who otherwise would be unlikely to take advantage of early childhood services. In particular, children's centres often encourage eligible families to take up our offer of 15 hours a week of free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds. Children's centres also work

[*Mr Goodwill*]

closely with local providers, offering funded places for two-year-olds to four-year-olds to ensure that families who need that crucial extra support receive it.

I am pleased that outcomes for children are improving. Early years foundation stage profile results show that, in 2016, 81.6% of children achieved at least the expected level in communication and language, compared with 72.2% in 2013. More children are achieving a good level of development by the age of five, and the gap between disadvantaged children and others continues to narrow, from 19 percentage points in 2013 to 17.3 percentage points in 2015-16. That is encouraging news and I am determined to make further progress.

The quality of early education is hugely important. In December 2016, 93% of providers on the early years register were judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding. As of January 2016, most two-year-olds benefiting from free early education were doing so in a high-quality setting. We also know that we need to invest in the dedicated people who are responsible for delivering early years education and care including, I suspect, those represented by the organisation that the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred to, which is in his constituency. Earlier this year, we published our early years workforce strategy to help employers to support, attract, retain and develop staff to deliver high-quality provision.

I have a few moments to comment on some of the points made in the debate. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon referred to the previous commitment to consult on the future of children's centre services, of which I am aware. The Government are committed to ensuring that all children, regardless of background, get the best possible start in life. I will consider carefully whether we can take additional steps. Indeed, the debate has fed into my thoughts.

The hon. Lady mentioned the closure of Sure Start children's centres. Children's centres have an important role to play in tackling disadvantage, but it is for councils to decide the best solutions for their area. Some councils are merging centres to deliver services more efficiently. Where councils decide to close a children's centre, they must demonstrate first that children and families, and particularly the most disadvantaged children and families, will not be adversely affected. Secondly, they must demonstrate that they still meet the duty to have sufficient children's centres to meet local need.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon for raising the incredibly important issue of tackling inequality. This Government have made a substantial financial investment in the early years and we want to ensure that it works for everyone, including the most disadvantaged.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Social Mobility

[*MARK PRITCHARD in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policies on social mobility.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. This debate builds on debates that were called in the previous Parliament. I believe that social mobility—or the lack thereof for the many—is the big issue of our time. It is creating a divided Britain, which not only is bad for our economy and our future, but is the defining issue of our time, as we have seen in recent elections and referendums.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): The recent report on social mobility confirmed the points that have been raised about our divided nation. Over the past 20 years we have come to have a new geographical divide, an income divide and a generational divide. The geographical divide is between successful city regions and places such as my constituency of Colne Valley and Kirklees, which have seen a lack of regional investment, leading to cuts that are affecting the most vulnerable. This Government have failed to address social inequality in all three areas.

Lucy Powell: I thank my new hon. Friend for raising those important points, which I will elaborate on further.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Not that the hon. Lady needs any time to prepare her answer to that question, but may I just say that I think the gentlemen might be suffering a little with the heat? It is very warm, so colleagues should please feel free to remove their jackets.

Lucy Powell: That is why some of us wore dresses.

There is the intergenerational inequality and the lack of opportunity for today's young people to progress, which I think was brought to the fore in the general election, and there is also the huge regional inequality that my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) mentioned.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on such an important topic. The Government are currently undertaking the youth full-time social action review, and last year I was lucky enough to visit City Year UK, which is a full-time social action programme. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to support such organisations and that the Government should listen to the review's recommendations when they are published in December?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I sure that the Minister will listen to what he has to say.

We have huge regional inequality and many communities have been left behind, which I think was expressed in the Brexit vote. We have stubborn wealth inequality, with a growing divide between rich and poor. Our country's failings on social mobility is the national challenge. As the Social Mobility Commission's excellent report "Time For Change: An Assessment of Government

Policies on Social Mobility 1997-2017” shows, despite some progress and well-intentioned policies, progress by successive Governments over the past 20 years has been painfully slow. The report by the commission, which is chaired by the right hon. Alan Milburn, states that

“successive governments have failed to make social mobility the cornerstone of domestic policy”.

That is the argument that I am putting forward today.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to refer to the report, because it is a powerful document. Much of it talks about the need for investment in early years and schools as the vehicle for social mobility. How does she think the Government can square that with the cuts to early years and schools? For example, Parrs Wood High School in my constituency—a school she knows well—faces losing the equivalent of 30 teachers between now and 2020.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Parrs Wood High School, which I attended and which my son now attends, is an outstanding comprehensive school, but it will struggle to continue to be so if those cuts come forward.

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Robert Goodwill) rose—

Lucy Powell: Perhaps we will hear more from the Minister on that point.

Mr Goodwill: I thank the hon. Lady for calling the debate, which provides us with a good opportunity. Will she welcome the fact that in her constituency 29,686 more children are in good or outstanding schools than were in August 2010? Is not that great progress from this Government?

Lucy Powell: We have seen some great progress and I will come on to that. In my constituency most of that progress has come from local leadership as well, and I will mention that later.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What the Minister says is belied by the fact that in further education in Coventry there have been cuts of roughly 27% and in the youth service there will be no funding for youth leaders, which does not exactly help the situation. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are not careful we will create another lost generation?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Post-16 and youth service funding is critical to the debate and I will touch on that later.

I urge all colleagues to read the Social Mobility Commission’s powerful report. It highlights the fact that the challenges we faced in 1997 are very different from those we face in 2017. It rightly calls for social mobility to be at the heart of all Government policy, decisions and actions, because it is only through a prolonged, determined and comprehensive Government-wide strategy that we may actually start to change the entrenched inequalities and the lack of social mobility for the many. The social mobility agenda is about the many, not the tiny few we often hear about who manage

to get themselves from the council estate to the boardroom or around the Cabinet table. The Prime Minister says that she is looking for a national purpose that brings all parties and the country together, and I say to her that if she made tackling social mobility her calling and the key test for her Government, against which all her actions were tested, she would get wide support from across the House.

Before looking at some of the policy areas where more needs to be done, let us remind ourselves why tackling the divides in Britain is so important. The Sutton Trust has found that failing to improve Britain’s low levels of social mobility will cost the UK economy a staggering £140 billion a year by 2050, or the equivalent of 4% of GDP. On current trends, by 2022 there will be 9 million low-skilled people chasing just 4 million low-skilled jobs, yet there will be a shortfall of 3 million higher-skilled people for the jobs of the future. The economic divides are even starker when we look at the regional disparities. Output per person in London is more than £43,000 a year, yet in the north-east of England it is less than £19,000. London and some of our renewed cities, such as my own city of Manchester, are increasingly the home of graduates and have vibrant growing economies.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Getting kids from ordinary backgrounds to university is a key way of enabling them to move up and get on. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the previous Labour Government on increasing student numbers, while acknowledging that there is still work to be done, particularly in post-industrial towns such as Ashfield, where we send only 21% of 18-year-olds to university, compared with an English national average of 32%?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend’s excellent point fits entirely with one of the main thrusts of the Social Mobility Commission’s report, which is that there are huge regional inequalities, particularly between our growing and vibrant cities, where many graduates live and work, and our heartland towns and former industrial places.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does she agree that it is not just geography but ethnicity that makes a difference? We sing long about the successes of London, but if we look at who is doing well in our schools, we see that it tends to be young people from black and Asian backgrounds, with white working-class kids still not making progress.

Lucy Powell: That is another excellent point. My hon. Friend will know about that issue from her own constituency.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lucy Powell: Yes, but then I will have to make some progress.

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and I commend her for securing this debate on a topic I know she is passionate about, and about which she has spoken passionately in the past. She was just talking about access to higher education. Will she welcome the

[*Rishi Sunak*]

fact that access for working-class families is at an all-time high, with students from working-class backgrounds now 70% more likely to apply to university than 10 years ago? Indeed, that was one of the areas on which the Milburn report gave a green light when evaluating the Government's progress.

Lucy Powell: I am happy to accept that point, which the report talks about more broadly, but challenges remain. There are some warning signs on the horizon and we should be careful that we do not end up taking a backward step in this important area.

The Social Mobility Commission has found that the generational divide is yawning. Over the past 20 years, poverty among pensioners has halved and their income today, on average, exceeds that of working adults. Meanwhile, young people's earnings have fallen. That cannot continue. It is no wonder that we saw a huge upsurge of anger, activism and engagement from younger voters at the general election. The wealth and income divide has also become much wider over the past 20 years, with top pay increasing much faster than the incomes of lower earners. In 1998 the highest earners were paid 47 times that of the lowest. By 2015 the highest earners were paid 128 times more than the lowest. Gaps in wealth have also grown exponentially, with home ownership and house price inflation benefiting the lucky few who already own their home. It is not just about the economic price we pay for these failings; as a society, these divisions are causing unrest, anger and resentment. That is leading to political volatility and, arguably, the rise of populism.

Those are just some of the reasons why the social mobility agenda is so important. It needs to be not only at the heart of all Government policy, but a national mission for our country. Successive Prime Ministers—Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and our current Prime Minister—have spoken a great deal about social mobility. Most recently, the current Prime Minister spoke about the “burning injustices” of our society. However, the Government's approach, while making progress in some areas, has not matched the rhetoric and has been piecemeal and disconnected.

Let us look at what could be done about social mobility. There are many recommendations in the Social Mobility Commission report and from the Sutton Trust, Teach First and many others. Recommendations should not be limited to education policy—far from it. Every Budget, every Bill and every policy should be judged against whether it tackles inequalities and boosts social mobility for everybody, everywhere. There needs to be a single cross-departmental plan to deliver social mobility.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and making an excellent opening speech. We know that the challenge with social mobility begins in childhood. An estimated 3,300 children in my constituency are living in households with problem debt. One suggestion has been to give a breathing space to families facing problem debt by giving them 12 months to try to get back on their feet. Does she agree that that is one step the Government could take to make a big difference to families getting themselves out of problem debt?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That is another great idea that I hope the Minister will respond to, and it shows the extent to which these policy areas need to be looked at across the piece.

Tackling social mobility also means looking at difficult issues such as inheritance tax, transport spending and social care. All those policies need to be looked at through the lens of social mobility. However, today I will focus on a few areas for which the Minister has responsibility, and for which the evidence and action needed are known and relatively straightforward. The first is early years, which colleagues and the Minister will know is a bug bear of mine, so I hope they will allow me to expand on that for a moment. It is well documented that by the time children reach the age of five there is already a big gap in school readiness or development between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Action for Children found that more than half of children from low-income families do not reach the expected milestones by the age of five. Often that gap is never fully closed during a child's schooling.

Given that we know some of what works, why are we not doing more? Over the past 20 years we have made some progress through family support services, Sure Start centres, quality early education and targeted approaches, such as the offer for two-year-olds. However, in recent times and with what is upcoming, the agenda seems to be moving backwards.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that one of the Departments that needs to be brought into this conversation is the Home Office? I am thinking specifically about incidents of domestic violence, which have been increasing in my constituency. Experiencing and being a victim of domestic violence impacts on children, particularly very young children, and their educational attainment.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Being in a domestic violence setting at home can have the most profound impact on the outcome of any child. We need to link that with children's services and other family support services. She is absolutely right.

The Government's emphasis is now almost entirely on childcare support for working families. That is a laudable aim in itself, but it perhaps focuses huge resources away from social mobility outcomes. Almost all the money for the 30 hours of free childcare for working families and tax-free childcare will go towards better-off families. Those policies are taking the Government's focus away from other issues. By definition, the most disadvantaged do not get the extra support, and the delivery of the new policies is also having a real impact on quality institutions.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Lady must understand that people working 16 hours on the minimum wage qualify for the additional 15 hours of funded childcare. Indeed, many people who cannot get into the workplace because of the cost of childcare will take the opportunity of 30 hours of childcare from September. That policy is a great achievement and will improve social mobility among people on low wages.

Lucy Powell: By definition, the most disadvantaged will not benefit from the policy. What we are seeing in some places, certainly in Manchester and other local authority areas, is that free childcare was given to the most disadvantaged, but that is now having to be switched from them to deliver the 30 hours for working families, and that surely is not what the Government intended. The Minister needs to have a look at that. Another unintended consequence of the new offer is the impact on our maintained nursery schools, which are an outstanding resource. Every single one—100%—of our maintained nursery schools are good or outstanding. Nearly all of them are in areas of high deprivation and disadvantage, but due to the new funding formula and the changes to funding, they are now under threat. Ministers need to look at the policies they are delivering and ensure that they meet the social mobility test and are not simply about getting people back into work.

Action for Children, the Social Mobility Commission and many others are calling for a clear plan to boost social mobility in the early years. That must include quality teaching, family support, children centres getting the resources they need and boosting the early years pupil premium. What happened to the life chances strategy that the Government spent two or three years working towards? It seems to have evaporated overnight.

Next, I want to turn my attention to schools. I do not want to take up too much time, although I have taken lots of interventions. As Teach First has shown, the social mobility challenge in our schools remains. While much progress has been made at primary, progress remains slow at key stage 4. One in three teenagers from poor families achieves basic GCSEs, compared with two thirds overall. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) highlighted, if bright children from poor families had the same support as others, four in 10 would go to a top university. Today, only one in 10 does.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing an important debate. She is making some excellent points, but in improving the life chances of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, is there not a case for putting money behind university outreach programmes to identify young people with ability and talent, as happened under the previous Labour Government? That would make opportunities for those people so that they can be helped into careers that they otherwise might not have thought were even possible, such as healthcare, where there is a real lack of people from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lucy Powell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The widening participation agenda has been successful in places and is important, but other barriers to getting those jobs remain for kids who perhaps do not have the same social networks or support at home, even if they have the same qualifications as some of their peers.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech in this important debate. I think we can build a cross-party consensus, based on the report, about access to social and emotional learning. I might call it character education—I think one of her predecessors as shadow Secretary of State for Education and I debated that issue. Persistence, resilience and grit

skills, as well as self-confidence and self-belief, are very important. They are often not given the same weight and therefore those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds do not get that access; access to extra-curricular activities is picked up in a similar way. Would the hon. Lady agree that that is something from the debate that could benefit from cross-party working?

Lucy Powell: I strongly agree with the right hon. Lady. I thank her for the joint working we have done on some of the issues in the past, and I hope that that will continue. When she was Secretary of State for Education, she was a strong champion for character education and extra-curricular education. I hope that that is something we can all work on going forward.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): All the additions are absolutely right, but the foundation has got to be strong as well; the funding for our school places is important. If my son Jack decides to go to university, he will be the first in our family to do that, but the school that he is attending faces losing 19 teachers. The sixth-form college that he would almost certainly go to faces losing 22 teachers. At the same time, the Government have wasted more than £10 million on a failed university technical college and a failed free school. How can that make sense?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I know that he has been championing the issues in Oldham, and I hope to work with him to continue to do that. I will say something on school funding in a moment, if I could make some progress.

Of all the measures and policies of the last 20 years, one that stands out as transformational for our schools is the London Challenge. London went from having some of the worst schools to now achieving the narrowest attainment gap of anywhere in the country. It is a key part of the overall London effect; 30 of the top 50 constituencies for social mobility are in London.

There are two key learnings from the London Challenge, which are now seriously at risk. The first is the supply of great teachers. The Minister's colleague in the Department for Education has finally started to recognise that recruitment and retention are major issues. Figures obtained by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) show that a quarter of teachers who have qualified since 2011 have left the profession. Statistic after statistic backs that up, and we know that it is the poorest children and the struggling schools that suffer most when teacher numbers drop.

Teachers deserve a pay rise. Yesterday's pay settlement is a huge disappointment. Real wages of teachers are down by more than 10%. But it is not just about pay; it is about workload and the constant changes to curriculums and expectations. Ministers really must get a grip of the issue and do it fast.

The second learning from the London Challenge is about funding, which my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) mentioned. The increase in school budgets over many years, coupled with targeted support such as the pupil premium, has had a real impact on the attainment gap, which was narrowing until very recently. It has narrowed significantly in London, where funding was boosted the most. The real terms cuts to schools' budgets that schools are now having to make—before we even get to the national

[Lucy Powell]

funding formula—will, again, hit the poorest hardest. Interventions, extra support and supported activities all benefit the poorest most. Recent teacher polling has shown that a third of school leaders are now using the pupil premium to plug the gaps in general funding, that almost two thirds of secondary heads had had to cut back on teaching staff and that schools with more disadvantaged intakes were the most likely to report cuts to staffing.

The Government are totally kidding themselves if they think that the real terms cuts to school budgets, together with the teacher supply crisis, are not going to show in a widening of the attainment gap and a major step back in social mobility in our schools.

Gloria De Piero: I met with the headteacher of Ashfield Comprehensive yesterday. The school faces a budget cut of almost £1 million from last September to this September, and he is facing a choice between bigger class sizes and fewer subjects. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the sort of thing that hinders social mobility?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those are some of the unpalatable decisions that headteachers are having to make. There is no question but that those decisions will have a real impact on outcomes, so I am sure we would all support the Minister going back to the Treasury to say that the real-terms cuts need addressing, and quickly.

Social mobility should be at the heart of education policy; every part of the system should work to unleash the talents of all young people. That means that existing grammar schools must do more to tackle the issues, rather than entrenching advantage and damaging wider social mobility. I am very pleased that the Government have dropped their plans to open new grammar schools. However, they said that they would tackle social mobility in existing grammar schools. Figures that I have released today show that since 2016, the number of children on free school meals in grammar schools has hardly shifted at all—it has gone up by just 0.1 percentage point—despite calls from Ministers that existing grammar schools should increase their intake of low-income children.

In the “Schools that work for Everyone” consultation, Ministers said that existing grammar schools needed to do more. They are now saying that they feel that they have fulfilled that objective and so are dropping plans to require existing grammar schools to address the issue. If existing grammar schools do not reform their admissions and play their part in boosting social mobility, they should cease to receive public funding. We should be rewarding the schools that do the most for pupil progress for the majority of pupils, and that narrow the attainment gap, which is why we should reform league tables so that they show not just attainment but pupil progress, and progress in narrowing the attainment gap.

I cannot cover everything in the short time we have. Needless to say, huge gaps remain in post-16 education. I hope that the new T-levels and quality apprenticeships will help to address that, but that will happen only if they remain focused entirely on social mobility outcomes and people do not get distracted by other agendas. As

others have said, and as the Sixth Form Colleges Association and others have shown, post-16 funding in Britain is still among the lowest in the OECD. We need to address that too.

As we have discussed previously, access to university and, crucially, outcomes and access to work beyond university remain a huge concern. Too few graduates are working in graduate jobs; in fact, we have the third lowest level of graduates working in graduate jobs of all OECD countries. The only countries behind us in that league table are Greece and Estonia. That is a travesty and it brings into question whether the debt, and the exercise, is worth it. Destinations of graduates and others are still most determined not by qualification and ability but by networks and social connections.

We could have a whole other debate about regional inequalities and how we boost social mobility everywhere. The devolution agenda that we all support must also have social mobility at its heart.

I know that the Minister will want to tell us why we cannot afford any of these plans. I would say that we cannot afford not to do them. Our economy and society pays a heavy price for people working below their ability and for wasted talent and wasted communities. The Minister’s economics are false economics and will end up costing us dear in the long run. Achieving a step-change in social mobility for the many, not just the lucky few, is the challenge of our time. Opportunity and progress for the young, a new deal for left-behind communities and a radical rethink on tax and spend policies all need reshaping around a new national mission to make Britain a world leader in social mobility, not a country that sits towards the bottom of the pack, as we do today. Although Brexit will dominate and define, I am sure that we across the House will all come together around that national mission.

2.59 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for securing this important debate. The Government have made significant progress on tackling social mobility, but we need to do more to remove the barriers that stand in people’s way. People should not be prevented from fulfilling their potential because of their age, family circumstance, race, disability, sexuality, postcode or simply how much their parents earn. Too often, the ladder of opportunity runs out of rungs pretty quickly. The Government are already getting on with some of that, and we are seeing results. I am sure my hon. Friends will want to talk in more detail about that.

Siobhain McDonagh: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that half of 18 to 24-year-olds believe that their destination in life is based on their parents’ socioeconomic status? How depressing is that in the 21st century?

Paul Masterton: I am aware of that. The hon. Lady may not be aware of this, but in Scotland roughly one in five people leaves school and goes straight into the dole queue. That is why it is important that we look at both Governments’ policies on improving social mobility and continuing to provide good jobs. The record employment under this Conservative Government is so important.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place as a newly elected Member. He is talking about the figures for Scotland, but does he recognise that, under the Scottish Government, more children are progressing from school to positive destinations than ever before? [*Interruption.*]

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. A phone just went off. Can people keep their phones on mute or vibrate?

Paul Masterton: I am aware of that, but some of the things the Scottish Government consider to be positive destinations are things that most people would not consider to be so.

The Government are getting on with some of those things, but we need to be imaginative in our responses. We know that two children with parents on the same income and with the same educational qualifications will experience different levels of social mobility depending on their surroundings. A person is more likely to be upwardly mobile if they live in a mixed socioeconomic neighbourhood, so how do we create policies that bring different parts of the community together and expose our children to people with different views, values and backgrounds?

More and more people are working atypical hours, which often conflict with the opening hours of essential public services. If someone does not have a network to fall back on or someone to pick their kids up from school, they are more likely to drop out of the jobs market. If someone struggles to get a doctor's appointment around their working hours, they are much less likely to get early help for a health problem.

As well as social mobility, we need to talk about social exclusion, because the latter is hugely detrimental to the former. Of course, a huge driver of social mobility is earning power and the confidence and self-reliance that comes from being in work. Conservative action to support a modern industrial strategy, invest in infrastructure, provide city deals for places such as the Glasgow city region, and cut taxes for small businesses, corporations and families alike, is helping to drive employment growth. We have more jobs and record employment. More low-paid are out of taxation, and the national living wage has been introduced. Those things really matter, because they broaden opportunity, deliver jobs and improve future generations' life chances.

It is true that in-work poverty is too high in Scotland and the rest of the UK. There are UK-wide levers, such as tax and benefits policy and the national minimum wage, but the agenda can be set at a more regional level, both by the devolved Administrations—particularly Scotland, if there are further transfers of tax and social security powers—and by local councils. That should not be overlooked. Regional economic development can drive up wages and increase the demand for employees to work more hours. Skills development can help workers move into better-paid jobs, and a focus on economic diversification can aid unsatisfied workers change industry. For example, the underemployed—people who would like more hours but cannot get them—are more likely to work in fluid sectors such as hospitality and retail. That all helps to motor social mobility, and it must continue to form the cornerstone of the policy agenda. The Taylor report provides a fantastic opportunity for the

Government to revisit many of the structural issues in the modern world of work, and to adapt and create policy that takes the new landscape into account.

Although education is devolved, there are things that we can learn from each other on both sides of the border. I believe that a good education is the single biggest social mobility tool we can provide. Much of the education debate centres on higher education and tuition fees, so I was pleased that the hon. Member for Manchester Central focused more on early years, because that is key. Many people have been dealt their cards for life by the time long before they fill in their UCAS form, so if we are serious about social mobility, funding has to be ploughed into early years. It is about not just increasing hours for three and four-year-olds, which most parents cannot access anyway—the Governments in Westminster and Edinburgh appear to be in an arms race to do that—but investing in high-quality childcare.

The Scottish Conservatives have a distinct voice and get it right on that issue. We say, first, that before increasing hours for three and four-year-olds, we need to extend the current allowance to two-year-olds and more disadvantaged one-year-olds; and, secondly, that we need to ensure that funding is used to train up a more highly qualified professional workforce. Early years education and childcare need to have a real purpose of intent. We must develop literacy and numeracy, which are dropping very quickly in Scottish schools, as well as social skills, to narrow the divide that is currently so wide as to be almost irrecoverable by the time our kids walk through the primary school gates. We must bridge the gap between the point maternity leave ends and free childcare provision begins. We need to understand that the driver of social mobility is in those crucial early years, when the attainment gap takes root.

Students from the most advantaged areas are four times more likely to go to university than those from the least advantaged areas in Scotland—it three times more likely in Wales and Northern Ireland, which is lower but still high, and two and a half times more likely in England. That starts right back in nursery. In Scotland, the gap in attainment can start as early 18 months.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend is making a very thoughtful contribution to this excellent debate. I completely agree with him about the need for investment in early years. We need to take a longer-term look at public investment, which does not always happen, to ensure the investment improves children's life chances from very early on. Given that local government budgets in England are under a lot of pressure, and that a lot of early years funding comes from local authorities, what is his advice to the British Government about how to improve things in England, drawing on his Scottish learning?

Paul Masterton: I have learned that it does not tend to go down well when Scottish MPs stick their oar in, so English MPs should deal with their own system. There have been large local government cuts to the settlements in Scotland, which are impacting on services. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about the long-term view, but unfortunately Governments of all colours in all Parliaments around the UK often look for short-term quick fixes.

One of the things I am particularly pleased to see down here in Westminster is the UK Government's focus on technical and vocational education. We have

[*Paul Masterton*]

not seen that in Scotland, where there have been huge cuts to technical education and more than 150,000 college places have been cut. The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government have decided to value academic education over and above technical education. That is completely the wrong way to do it. I am very excited to see what these changes and reforms in the English school system will do. The Scottish Government have finally given way a bit on things such as Teach First. The hon. Member for Manchester Central talked about the London Challenge, which was hugely successful, and which we can learn a lot from in Scotland. I am very excited to see how some of those reforms play out.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) rose—

Rishi Sunak rose—

Paul Masterton: Ladies first.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He would accept, though, that the Scottish Government have very recently announced that they will be putting £750 million extra into closing the attainment gap.

Paul Masterton: I would, but the Scottish Government have been in power for 10 years, and they seem only now to have decided to make education their priority. That has come a bit too late for many families and a lost generation of kids who have been in education under devolution.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I welcome him to his place. I want to touch on his comments about technical and further education. I have campaigned in this House to ensure parity of esteem between those routes and higher education. He talked about filling out UCAS forms. I have talked to Ministers about the idea of having a UCAS for apprenticeships system, which Alan Milburn recommends in his report and which was included in the Government's industrial strategy. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming that proposal, which could ensure parity of esteem and make it easier for young people to embrace a career outside university?

Paul Masterton: Absolutely. Just to be controversial, I commend the Scottish Government on the work they are seeking to do on apprenticeships. They have cottoned on to that major issue and are doing some good work on that front.

Catherine McKinnell: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of apprenticeships. It is important that we focus on access to university and higher education, but for an awful lot of young people, a route into an apprenticeship can unlock their potential. I co-chair the all-party group on apprenticeships, and we are launching a report today that focuses on what the Government can do to increase massively what schools and colleges do to promote apprenticeships, to ensure that schools are incentivised to send their children and young people into apprenticeships rather than just the university route. Otherwise, they close up avenues to

young people who would benefit from apprenticeships. I encourage the Government to take up some of the recommendations in the report.

Paul Masterton: The hon. Lady makes me think of the number of graduates not going into graduate-entry jobs, which the hon. Member for Manchester Central mentioned earlier. Partly that is because of the exponential rise in the number of graduates, and because the UK jobs market has not kept pace with it. That brings us to the wider issue of whether there are a lot of people going to university whose future potential would be best tapped into through another route.

Kids learn differently, so we need to allow them to be taught differently. They have different skillsets, so we need to have an education system that allows all of those skillsets to be nurtured and developed. Ultimately, kids have different aspirations and goals and we need to ensure that we have guidance and routes in place to help every child get to where they want to be, rather than being funnelled automatically through to university education as a default, which is what happens in a lot of schools.

Many have said in the past that poverty is a cost that the UK cannot afford. They are right. We need to move from treating the symptoms of poverty to treating its underlying and fundamental causes. The commission, which is a few years old now, found that £4 in every £10 was spent on dealing with the causes of poverty after they had occurred, not on preventing them. That simply wastes bad money.

The Government have a great story to tell, but people are ultimately more than numbers on a spreadsheet or plots on a graph. Social mobility and the effectiveness of the Government's policies are measured just as much in how people feel their lives are going on the ground. Far too many people feel let down and passed by. It is simply not okay for the UK to be a country where it is still better to be rich and a bit dim than poor and clever.

What was so important about the Prime Minister's first speech outside No. 10 was that, like David Cameron's life chances agenda, it understood that, although income is crucial, we will not get rid of poverty and improve social mobility by lifting income levels alone. We have to deal with some of the underlying causes, which means that too many people simply do not get a fair shot.

It is absolutely vital that, whatever else might be going on, the Government go back to the speech and put it at the heart of everything they do. If they can do that, they can truly tackle the potential sapping prejudices people face every day and make a real push on social mobility.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. There are five speakers. I shall impose a time limit of three minutes because of the amount of interest in this debate, and because we have to allow time for the Front Benchers to wind up.

3.12 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this debate. Obviously, party political points can be made about funding and the closure of Sure Start and children's centres and suchlike but, leaving those to one side, I hope the Minister will not be

defensive. He was very defensive in responding to one or two of the comments made and said, “Oh, this is what the Government are doing.” My hon. Friend had a powerful message: there is a need for a national crusade to tackle inequality and social mobility in our country. The various reports that have been mentioned have a powerful message. They state that there has been progress, but under successive Governments it has been slow and the gap between people has increased. It is now a national disgrace that, in one of the richest countries in the world, life is so unequal and so lacking in opportunity for people born into certain situations. The Minister needs to respond to that challenge rather than say, “This is what we are doing.” There is a time for a party political debate, but this is not the right time.

I will explain why I think this issue is so important. I started teaching in 1976. After my post-graduate course, I was able to choose which school I went to. I had studied social background and educational attainment, so I chose to go to a school with some of the most difficult challenges. The school was in an educational priority area. Teachers were paid more money to go there and the best people were recruited. If we went back to that area now, 40 or so years later, we would find that many of the same families are still stuck in a state of poverty and low achievement. I am not a prophet of doom, but that tells us that that situation simply cannot be right. It is simply unacceptable that we drive round our cities or our rural areas and can almost point to where there is low achievement and low aspiration. The challenge to the Government—hopefully the next Labour Government—is what are they going to do about it? We cannot go back to the policies that have not worked or have worked too slowly.

This is difficult for the Minister. We cannot pass a law that says there should be good parenting, but some of our families and parents need more support. It cannot be right that sometimes when a child goes to school or nursery, they cannot use a knife and fork. Something is wrong and we need to look at how we support families to get their children to the point they need to be at to enter our schools or our nurseries. We need to get them to the point where we can really say social mobility is the priority of whatever Government of the day.

3.15 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for a very thoughtful speech, particularly on evaluating pupil progression and outcomes for graduates. There is much more work we can do in both those areas. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) for his excellent speech.

Opportunity for all was my calling into politics—we all have our own individual callings. I went to a school that was at the bottom of the league tables. My father died at an early age and I understood the importance of opportunity for all, regardless of background. In my remaining two and a half minutes, while celebrating the fact that record employment has seen youth unemployment in my constituency fall by a staggering 61%, which is a vital tool for helping social mobility, I have a quick wish list of things that I want a proactive and constructive Government to deliver.

First, it is welcome that 1.8 million more children are in good or outstanding schools, but as a society we need to do more to celebrate the very best of teachers: those who have made the biggest difference, particularly to those from the most challenging backgrounds. We need to make more of those really outstanding individuals. I am not biased because my father, grandma and grandad were all teachers.

We need far more mentors to come into schools, engaging the local business community and the voluntary sector, because the people who have made a difference can inspire young people. I still remember my careers teacher telling me I had no chance of getting into Parliament, so anything is possible.

I am a big fan of university technical colleges, but they have a challenge. The entry level is two years after the typical secondary school enrolment, so there is a disincentive for secondary schools to suggest their best students go there. Perhaps the Government should consider lowering the age of entry or share the school league table results of the students so that those who are more technically minded can embrace their full potential.

I am a huge fan of apprenticeships. I was proud once again to attend the graduation ceremony at Swindon College last week where people from some really challenging backgrounds have started their first step into a successful career. I love the idea of the UCAS system, but we need to do far more to promote the opportunities of apprenticeships to small businesses. The sugar tax is a wonderful opportunity to provide constructive sport, after-school and holiday activities, which make a difference to busy parents as well as providing enjoyment, confidence and teamwork skills.

The national citizen service is a brilliant scheme, but in recent years I feel the quality of the leadership there is not as good as it used to be, so we are missing a trick. I am a big fan of the introduction of the named work coach in universal credit that will for the first time provide support for those in work and not just finding work. Finally, on the income divide between the older and younger generations, only six Governments since the second world war have collected more in taxation than they spend. When that does not happen, a further burden is put on our children. We must never forget that.

3.18 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing another debate on this incredibly important subject. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility in the previous Parliament, I have read with increasing alarm the numerous reports produced by the Social Mobility Commission. Its recent report, “Time for Change”, was a real wake-up call. As my hon. Friend said, it is the challenge of our time. I was attracted to the idea of breaking down recommendations into four life stages, but the report shows that unless we get the right measures in place at the first stage in the early years, everything else becomes much more difficult. Sadly, falling behind in those early years is often a portent for one’s entire life.

Hon. Members have already talked about the geographical divide, but there is also a generational one. I do not believe that the recent general election was a

[*Justin Madders*]

ring endorsement of the status quo. We saw that the more young people engaged with the question of what they wanted from the Government, the more they turned away from the existing set-up—and who can blame them? Do they want to better themselves and study at university? There are more opportunities now, but they come with an eye-watering debt that might never be paid off. Do they want to own a home of their own? Unless the bank of mum and dad is there to fall back on, it could be a long wait. Do they want to build a career in a profession doing something rewarding, financially and intellectually? Those opportunities exist, but for the few, not the many.

Young people's more likely experience in the job market will be casual work, low pay and chronic insecurity. As the commission's report highlights, young people's wages have fallen by 16%; one in five people in the UK are stuck on low pay—a higher proportion than in comparable nations—wages have stagnated in real terms, leading to falling living standards, particularly for young people; and, although youth unemployment has fallen, the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training has barely changed. The number of young people receiving careers advice or work experience has fallen, and more new apprenticeships have gone to older workers than to younger ones.

As the report suggests, we should adopt what I would describe as a “mobility in all” approach, and examine every Government policy or proposal for how it would improve social mobility. One good example of how we are not doing well at that is the Government's decision to expand the number of medical school places. The all-party parliamentary group's report on access to the professions recognised medicine as one of the areas in which those from privileged backgrounds are disproportionately represented. I recently asked the Minister a written question on what steps the Government were taking to address that. His response was:

“Funding an additional 1,500 medical school places in England will provide more opportunities for people to study”.

Perhaps it will, but without further intervention it is more likely just to repeat the pattern of professions being dominated by people from fee-paying schools.

However, it is not only on access to professions that we need to do more. If the reports that up to a half of all jobs will be automated in the next decade are correct, we will have to undertake a massive, state-sponsored exercise in reskilling the workforce. The world of work is changing rapidly. Training and redeployment are threads that should run through a person's entire life. Three, four or five career changes will be the norm in the future, and we are not ready for that.

3.22 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. The recent work of the Social Mobility Commission, which has already been mentioned by a couple of hon. Members, was so damning that I rather suspect the commission is not long for this world. In two decades there has been no real progress: 20 years in which the only movement seems to have been backwards. From my brief look at the research papers, it appears that Scotland is not particularly included in the analysis. I

do not know whether I would have found references to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland if there had been more time, but the report seems mainly to be a body of work referring to England. Scotland, of course, has its own Government and Parliament, to take forward more progressive policies—policies so progressive that Labour copied them wholesale in its general election manifesto and was then praised for being radical.

Social mobility, however, depends on a lot more than the current devolved powers can deliver. It requires easy access to social security—a helping hand for people who want to make a better life through education and perhaps start their own business. It also requires a good health service, good housing and a cohesive society. It needs opportunities to be available—an economy that works in the best interest of us all, rather than just a few. It needs the Government to take an attitude that encourages new enterprise rather than protecting those who already have money. Real social mobility requires an expansive, open attitude to the world—the kind of attitude that would embrace the EU and immigrants, and the opportunities that both bring. Social mobility needs parity of esteem between people, which seems to me to be in pretty poor supply in this place.

To deal briefly with the commission's research, it said that both Tory and Labour Governments have largely failed the people they were elected to represent. I was particularly taken by what it said about the stalling of young people's ambitions or, to put it in brutal capitalist terms, the waste of the great resource of youth. Young people's wages are lower now than they were in 1997, for goodness' sake; they should be building their lives, and the economy should benefit from their frittering away, if you like, a decent disposable income before they get serious financial commitments that eat it all up. That is before we consider the damage that carrying a huge student loan does to people's prospects.

Paul Masterton: First, I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware that the rise in low pay is much slower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. Secondly, given that in 2014 Alan Milburn said that a lack of political debate and engagement on social mobility in Scotland meant that it was sleepwalking into a social mobility crisis, does she accept that perhaps the Scottish Government had other things on their mind in about 2014, and that they took their eye off the ball in relation to social mobility policy?

Deidre Brock: I remind the hon. Gentleman that youth unemployment is at its lowest rate since records began in Scotland—it is the second lowest in the EU—that free tuition has been reintroduced and protected, so that young people do not start their working lives with enormous debts, and that a record number of Scots are supported into university. He appears to have forgotten those facts.

The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is still at the same level. A valuable workforce in England is wasted, sitting on the sidelines whiling their lives away. Retention and graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students have barely improved. Careers advice and work experience opportunities are disappearing and apprenticeships go to older rather than younger workers. Generation after generation have been failed by the paucity of ambition of Governments

who thought it more important to curry favour with the wealthy and privileged, and left a fabulous resource untapped. That is short-sighted at best, and more likely cruel and thoughtless. Social progress and social justice require social mobility. Governments, Parliaments and politicians fail if we do not facilitate that.

3.26 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I think that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) read a different report from the one I read, which highlighted both successful and unsuccessful policies. We should not finish the debate without mentioning one of the most extraordinary Ministers I have ever met—Lord Adonis. His work on the London challenge is a beacon, showing what can be done.

Housing is the largest issue facing my south-west London constituency, so I want to mention some housing facts. Owning a home is an important part of people's feelings of self-worth and success, and social mobility. It was the most financially important thing to happen to my mum and dad in their lives. That is why it is worrying that home ownership among the under-25s has dropped by 50%. Even more worryingly for children, home ownership rates for 24 to 35-year-olds have reduced from 59% to 37%. It strikes me as extraordinary that the report suggests that some of the poorest families spend 31% of their income on housing, because people coming to my surgery spend 110% of their income on it. They work but are completely dependent on housing benefit to pay their rent. As for the people at the top, in 1997 they spent 13% of their income on their house, whereas today they spend 8%.

In 1997 the value of homes in relation to the income of their owners was in a ratio of 3.5:1, meaning that people could expect to buy a house worth 3.5 times their income. Today the ratio is 9.5:1. That is impossible to achieve, so we throw families with young children into the unregulated and uncontrolled private rented sector, where they have not only the monthly fear about whether they can clear their rent, but the knowledge that they can be evicted simply with a court order. The number of families I meet who have children—often disabled children—and who move house up to three times a year, and the thousands of children currently in poor temporary accommodation in the capital, paid for out of our taxes, is a ticking time bomb for social mobility. I hope that the Minister will discuss housing in his response.

3.29 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing the debate, and on her thorough speech. She had ample support from this well-populated Chamber.

I want to mention a couple of speeches, including, obviously, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who has just taken over as the Scottish National party spokesperson on fair work and employment. She made a good speech about the situation in Scotland. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) discussed his past as a teacher

and previous initiatives. He is right: social mobility is about more than education. In many ways we need to address the reasons for children turning up at school in an impoverished state. That is something that will be important. It is not just a matter of education, although that is a driver for improving social mobility. We need also to consider why some children arrive at school like that. At the end of the day, that comes down to money in people's pockets, and we need to address it quickly.

The “State of the Nation 2016” report highlights the devastating reality about social mobility in the UK:

“The rungs on the social mobility ladder are growing further apart.”

That is having an effect on an entire generation of young people. In fact, the Social Mobility Commission highlighted the fact that 35% of those aged between 18 and 24 in the UK believe that social mobility is getting worse. We live in a society where those from less advantaged backgrounds find it harder and harder to advance their social position in the UK. We therefore cannot afford to ignore their plight and watch the gap widen further.

The Young Women’s Trust, already quoted, has shown that in the UK more than half of “young people said they feel worried for the future”.

That includes those who are transitioning from full-time education to work, and those who are suffering as a result of poor vocational routes. The report from the trust continues:

“As a result, young people are struggling to make ends meet, unable to move away from home or forced to live in insecure accommodation, skipping meals so they can feed their children and turning to food banks.”

The UK Government should be absolutely appalled by such realities.

The Social Mobility Commission’s analysis of the lack of mobility in the UK focuses on various life stages in which progress has or has not been made: no life stage has received a green rating; two are amber, “Early Years” and “Schools”; and two are red, “Young People” and “Working Lives”. That furthers the emphasis that should be placed on progressing the position of young people in society, and increasing incomes for all groups rather than just some.

The House of Commons Library blog notes that young people—those in their 20s in particular—have seen their average incomes slump, thereby linking the challenges faced by the younger generation to the lack of productivity in our economy. Children are told that work is the best route to greater success, but how can that motivate them when so many see their parents struggling day in, day out for low wages, with the worst wage growth in 200 years, according to the Resolution Foundation, uncertain job security and reductions in the tax credits that were designed to help them?

In Scotland, we have seen greater efforts to increase social mobility through free tuition fees, increased investment in education—in early years in particular, and £750 million invested in closing the attainment gap—and commitments from the Scottish Government to increase early learning and childcare entitlement to 1,140 hours per year by 2020. Those initiatives all aim to give every child the best start in life, regardless of their wealth or social background. The importance of free tuition fees remains prevalent and a key investment

[Neil Gray]

in the future of our young people. No child should be thwarted of an education through a fear of debt created by the harsh tuition fees imposed on students in the rest of the UK. We are therefore doing what we can in Scotland within the devolved framework.

It is time for the UK Government to step up to the mark, using the full suite of their powers. To do so, they should examine the UK's position in comparison with other countries around the world. A report by the Stanford Centre on Poverty and Inequality highlights the fact that social mobility in countries such as Denmark, Norway and Finland is far greater than that experienced in the UK. Instead, we are likened to and ranked lower than the US. *The Economist* has detailed issues with social mobility in the US by linking them to education. Many elite universities seek to find talent from all backgrounds, but the middle class are still left with huge debts to repay merely because they want the most desirable jobs, most of which require a university degree. The ways of US education further the Stanford Centre's analysis that

"the American Dream is evidently more likely to be found on the other side of the Atlantic, indeed most notably in Denmark".

Looking to the practices of Scandinavian countries and learning from their efforts would ensure that a more proactive approach is taken to increase social mobility across society, rather than having it focused on the privileged few. Denmark in particular invests largely in its education, thereby allowing the cognitive skills of low-income children to benefit. It is time to invest in our services and our people to allow the best outcomes for people from all backgrounds to flourish. Right now, too many are being stymied by this UK Government's policies.

3.33 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this debate. It follows a debate in the main Chamber that she, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and the then Member for Sheffield, Hallam secured from the Backbench Business Committee in the previous Parliament.

The Government's Social Mobility Commission report, "State of the Nation", told us the scale of the challenge we face to improve social mobility in Britain. The report told us in no uncertain terms:

"Britain has a deep social mobility problem...We identify four fundamental barriers that are holding back a whole tranche of low and middle income families and communities in England: an unfair education system, a two-tier labour market, an imbalanced economy, and an unaffordable housing market."

That was also referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh).

The report presented the Government with a number of proposals on parenting and early years, schools, post-16 education, jobs and housing, yet there is no evidence that they have yet listened fully to those proposals, let alone made them policy. Will the Minister tell us which of the recommendations his Department will take forward as policy? For example, on early years, the report calls for the Government to:

"Set a clear objective for early years services that by 2025 every child is school-ready at five and the child development gap has been closed, with a new strategy to increase the availability of high-quality childcare to low-income families."

I welcome the contribution of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who talked in particular about early years.

The Minister's Department has made no indication that it will adopt such plans. In fact, its policies will do quite the opposite. Will the Minister tell us why, instead of directing resources towards those who need it most, his Department will spend around £1 billion a year on a policy of so-called tax-free childcare, which will be of greatest benefit to those who have £10,000 to spend on childcare? Will the Minister tell us which low-income families he knows who have £10,000 to spend, or will this be another ditched policy?

Will the Minister tell us why the eligibility criteria for the 30 hours of free childcare will actually mean that tens of thousands of low-income families are not eligible for the extra childcare? I am sure he is growing tired of being reminded of promises in the 2015 manifesto that are being broken, but the manifesto pledge was clear, promising that his party would

"give working parents of 3 and 4-year-olds 30 hours of free childcare a week."

Mr Goodwill: On manifesto pledges, will the hon. Gentleman clarify the situation on student debt? On Sunday, we seemed to get a different message from the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), from the one we heard during the general election?

Mike Kane: First and foremost, that was not in our manifesto. In this country, we have about £80 billion of student debt stored up, and the Department has already estimated that we will not get a third of that back. We already have the most indebted students on the planet, and at some stage the Government will have to tackle that scenario.

The Opposition know the immense importance of intervention in the early years to improve the life chances of children in Britain. That is why Labour opened more than 3,000 Sure Start centres, and increased education spending every year that we were in government. In this week's spirit of new-found bipartisanship, will the Minister follow our example and support the most disadvantaged children, as we did in the previous Labour Government?

I will briefly address a number of recommendations. First and foremost, I remind the Minister that his own Social Mobility Commission took a clear view on his party's flagship grammar schools policy going into the election. The commission said that grammar schools would not work. Eventually, however, the electorate sunk the policy, and that was sneaked out in a written statement while the Secretary of State and the Front-Bench team were on the Floor of the House of Commons.

Before the election, we heard a great deal about a White Paper. Will the Minister confirm whether we will be getting an education White Paper in this Parliament? Will he also confirm whether the £500,000 of funding pledged for new grammar schools will now start being put back into the general schools budget, which is under severe pressure, as we all know?

We have reached a point at which school budgets are facing real-terms cuts for the first time in 20 years. The National Audit Office has told us that there will be an 8% cut in per pupil education spending over the course of this Parliament. That will not help social mobility and is flagrantly breaking another clear 2015 manifesto commitment that the funding following a child into schools will be protected. I can see that from the Minister's own education authority of North Yorkshire, including his fine constituency of Scarborough and Whitby. He pointed out to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central how many children were in better schools, but £28.5 million is being taken out of schools in North Yorkshire between now and 2021.

Will the Minister therefore do what the Prime Minister failed to do when asked about that and explain why the Government are breaking another manifesto pledge? Cuts to school budgets will make it impossible to deliver on many of the Social Mobility Commission's recommendations, shift resources towards areas that most need them, close the attainment gap and support teachers. Teachers continue to leave the profession in record numbers. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central cited statistics that show that a quarter of trained teachers have gone since 2011. I am a former teacher myself—brilliant colleagues in Trafford, where I worked for many years, are leaving the profession because of the real-terms pay cuts over the years, the increasing pressures on school budgets, and class sizes, which are increasing more and more.

The Government have failed to give even a basic response to the recommendations of their own Social Mobility Commission. I wish that they would do so. I praise my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Mitcham and Morden and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and the hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), for their contributions. The University of Oxford recently published a report about food bank use, in which the Bishop of Durham, the Right Rev. Paul Butler, wrote:

“This report highlights the need for all of us to refocus our efforts on ensuring that every child is able to reach their full potential regardless of their background.”

All Members should make that their motto when talking about this issue.

3.41 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Robert Goodwill): I certainly agree with the very last thing that the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) said; it seems to me that the entire House could be united around that comment by the Bishop of Durham. I thank the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for securing the debate; I am pleased to have an early opportunity to discuss this issue. I will leave a couple of minutes for her to sum up at the end, if she would like to.

Education is fundamental to breaking the link between a person's background and where they get to in life. It is our primary tool for opening up opportunity and giving people a chance to go as far as their talents and ambitions will take them. The Prime Minister has talked about areas in which we can work together, and I hope that this is one of those. The hon. Member for Gedling

(Vernon Coaker) was possibly a little churlish; I was really only trying to correct one or two facts that might have helped the hon. Lady to develop her arguments.

I am grateful to the Social Mobility Commission for setting out its views in its recent “Time for change” report, and I add my personal thanks to Alan Milburn. We welcome the report and recognise its conclusion that life chances are too often determined not by someone's efforts and talents but by where they come from, who their parents are and what school they attend.

At the start of this year, the Secretary of State set out three priorities for social mobility. They were tackling geographic disadvantage; investing in long-term capacity in the education system, and ensuring that that system really prepares young people and adults for career success. Before I explain how we are delivering against those priorities, I should emphasise that we are driving opportunity through everything we do. For instance, there are now 1.8 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools than there were in 2010, including—dare I say it—11,043 more in Conservative-controlled North Yorkshire, where 73,096 children are in good or outstanding schools.

Mike Kane: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: I will regret it, but I give way.

Mike Kane: The Minister mentioned—it was a Minister's “microphone moment”—1.8 million pupils. May I point out that those exact pupils were identified in 2010 by a Labour Government as being in coasting schools? The resources were put in, and this Government picked the low-hanging fruit. The Government say that more pupils are taught in good schools, but if that is so, why are our programme for international student assessment scores going down in international comparison?

Mr Goodwill: I disagree. As some of the primary school results that recently came out show, we are making real progress, certainly in key subjects such as maths and English. I am sure that we all welcome the tremendous impact that that will have on young people's life chances.

Rishi Sunak: I could not resist intervening, as my hon. Friend mentioned North Yorkshire schools. As a North Yorkshire MP, he will be aware that the current funding formula disadvantages pupils in North Yorkshire to the tune of hundreds of pounds relative to similar pupils in other areas around the country. Will he urge the Secretary of State to continue her work to correct that unfairness in the funding formula and find a positive solution for students in his constituency, in my constituency and across the country?

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. When I was first elected, I visited a school in one of the most deprived areas of my constituency. The head, who had come from another part of the country, said, “If we were in the middle of Rotherham, Bradford or Hull, we would be getting about 30% more money because of the school funding formula.” People in North Yorkshire certainly look forward to that being addressed.

As well as increasing school quality, we are strengthening the teaching profession, opening up access to higher education, transforming technical education, delivering 3 million apprenticeship places and investing in careers education. Beyond that progress, the Department is

[Mr Goodwill]

delivering against its social mobility priorities in several specific ways. We are tackling geographic disadvantage by focusing efforts on supporting specific areas that face the greatest challenges and have the fewest opportunities. We are investing £72 million in 12 opportunity areas—social mobility “cold spots” where the Department is working with a range of local partners to break the link between a person’s background and their destination. Those areas face some of the most entrenched challenges, as described in the Social Mobility Commission’s index last year.

Our approach goes beyond what the Department for Education and central Government can do alone; it extends to local authorities, schools, academy sponsors, local and national businesses, local enterprise partnerships, further education colleges, universities and the voluntary sector. Through that process, we will not just build opportunity now but lay the foundations for future generations. I was in Oldham on Thursday, and I was particularly impressed by the ambition and motivation in that opportunity area. Indeed, I am no stranger to some of the challenges in such areas—one of them is in my constituency. Hon. Members will note that that opportunity area had already been designated when I took on my current role.

Tackling geographic disadvantage is important, but so is investing in the long-term capacity of the education system. We are absolutely clear that some of the biggest improvements in social mobility can be achieved by deploying high-quality teaching. Contrary to what the hon. Member for Manchester Central said in her opening remarks, we have more teachers in our schools than ever before. There are now more than 457,000 teachers in state-funded schools throughout England, which is 15,500 more than in 2010.

Lucy Powell: I know that I will have a moment to sum up at the end, but just for the record, although we may have more teachers than ever before, there are also many more pupils than ever before. In relative terms, there is a chronic teacher supply issue.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Just for the record, there is no guarantee that the hon. Lady will have time at the end. The Minister might wish to give her two minutes to wind up, but it is entirely in his gift.

Mr Goodwill: I indicated that I was happy to give the hon. Lady a couple of minutes to get her own back on me if she needs to, Mr Pritchard.

More than 14,000 former teachers came back to the classroom in 2016, which is the last year we have data for. That is an 8% increase since 2011. Although having more teachers is important for everyone, it is also essential to focus on how we support the learning of the most disadvantaged children if we are to improve social mobility. We continue to provide the pupil premium, which is worth around £2.5 billion this year, but we want to ensure that that funding actually benefits the most disadvantaged, so we are also investing £137 million through the Education Endowment Foundation to expand the evidence base for what works for disadvantaged pupils.

Neil Gray: I made the point, which was supported by the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) from his experience of teaching and of previous initiatives, that we will see proper social mobility only if we understand and tackle the reasons why children arrive at school impoverished. Does the Minister agree that that is one of the fundamental ways we will change the social mobility crisis in this country?

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is why the work of the Education Endowment Foundation is so important in determining what early interventions actually work in improving the home learning environment for the many children who, as we have heard, arrive at school without knowing how to hold a knife and fork and, in some cases, not even potty-trained.

We are focusing on geographic inequality and we are building capacity. Our third priority is to ensure that the system prepares young people and adults for career success and encourages them to aim high. As was mentioned, we are taking steps to improve careers education and guidance for all ages. We are investing more than £70 million this year to support young people and adults to access high-quality careers provision. The Careers & Enterprise Company will ensure that every secondary school in each opportunity area has an enterprise adviser and delivers four encounters with the world of work for every young person. That will focus the whole education community in areas of the country where social mobility is lowest. We have also developed and expanded traineeships for under-25s, which give young people the skills and experience needed to progress to apprenticeships or sustainable employment.

We are delivering against our commitment to social mobility, but of course more must be done. We know that too often a child’s life chances are determined by where he or she comes from, and we understand that not everybody can access the opportunities available to them. In the early years, we must continue to work to ensure that all children are school-ready by the age of five. In schools, we must ensure that all children benefit from a rigorous academic curriculum and excellent teachers.

Beyond school, we must ensure that young people have the opportunity to pursue whatever route they choose. We must therefore continue to reform technical education to ensure that people have the skills they need to succeed in the world of work, and we must continue to provide the opportunity for disadvantaged young people to go to top-performing universities.

I am well aware of the point raised in the debate about UTCs taking children at the age at 14. Some children do not want to leave their friends at secondary school, and sometimes schools actively discourage children from leaving to go a UTC, even if the abilities and aspirations of that child would be best served in a UTC. We have a successful UTC in my constituency, working with local employers who are keen to have people leaving the UTC job-ready. Indeed, many see apprenticeships as the fast route into employment without the debt and problems that a university education can bring.

Throughout and after education, we must ensure that we equip young people with a high-quality careers advice offer so that every person can make an informed decision on their future. However, despite its pivotal

role, education alone cannot transform social mobility. Improving social mobility requires support from all parts of society, including Government, employers and civic society. Success has the potential to benefit society hugely, as we heard in the debate. Work by Boston Consulting Group and the Sutton Trust suggests that greater levels of social mobility could add £14 billion a year to GDP by 2030 and £140 billion by 2050. That is why we are building much wider collaboration.

On 21 June, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State spoke at the launch of the social mobility employer index. Employers naturally want the best talent, and the best employers are already taking steps to ensure that they draw their new recruits from a wider pool. That can include engaging young people in schools, introducing recruitment practices that prioritise potential, creating new routes to progression and promotion, and opening up alternative ways in through apprenticeships. The index showcases great work, including from Government and other public sector employers, and we hope that even more firms will sign up next year.

The Government are making significant progress on social mobility. Let me turn briefly to issues raised during the debate before I leave time for the hon. Member for Manchester Central. I congratulate and welcome my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). I endorse the comments he made in his contribution. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) made some thoughtful suggestions from experience, and he raised the point I made about UTCs.

The hon. Member for Manchester Central talked about maintained nurseries, which have a vital role. They are often in some of our most deprived areas—there is one in my constituency that does brilliant work—and because of the qualifications of the staff, it is more expensive to deliver such provision. Only about 1% of children attend that type of school, but in many ways they are the most needy children. She asked about how much extra we provided. Average funding has increased from £5.09 an hour to £5.39 an hour, and supplementary funding of £55 million a year has been made available for those schools until 2019-20. We listened to concerns and have responded.

The vexed issue of grammar schools was raised during the debate. As the hon. Lady may have noticed, there is no education Bill in the Queen's speech, so the ban on opening new grammar schools will remain in place. We were encouraged by the number of selective schools that came forward voluntarily to improve their admissions arrangements in response to the "Schools that work for everyone" consultation. We will continue to work with

our partners in the sector to ensure that more children from low-income backgrounds can go to grammar schools.

Points were raised about the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers—which, I have to say, has been virtually eliminated in grammar schools. The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates in selective schools is 1.7 percentage points, compared with eight percentage points in all schools. However, I reassure the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) that I am no grammar school fundamentalist myself.

I am enormously grateful to the hon. Member for Manchester Central for the support she has given to this agenda today. She raised important concerns, and I hope she is happy that those concerns are at the forefront of our work. Social mobility is vital. We know that education plays a fundamental role in that, and we will continue to build on what we are already doing by working closely with employers and other partners. The benefits to be gained by the agenda are significant, and the more society as a whole can support it, the better.

3.55 pm

Lucy Powell: I thank the Minister for his wind-up speech and for allowing me a short moment to thank those who have spoken in the debate. There have been some really thoughtful speeches and much agreement across the Chamber. I hope that that spirit can continue in these debates.

As ever, there were fantastic and important speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who raised some important points. I could also agree with almost the entire speeches of the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). I thank them for their contributions.

The turnout for the debate shows that there is a huge appetite to get cross-party agreement on these issues. I hope that that continues over the coming months, and that social mobility becomes part of a national mission we can all get behind so that we can really create the equal and fair society we all aspire to.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government policies on social mobility.

Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE in the Chair]

3.58 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the future of the Worcester Acute NHS Trust.

It is a great pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this matter, a cause of deep concern and worry for the people of Redditch and the surrounding area.

As this is a day on which health is being discussed in this place, I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for her tireless work on behalf of the victims of the contaminated blood scandal. I have a constituent in Redditch who has contacted me, even in my first few weeks of serving as a Member of Parliament, and I know that they and other victims will welcome the inquiry announced today.

The Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust caters for a population of between 420,000 and 800,000 people. Referrals from GP practices outside of Worcestershire currently make up 13% of the trust's market share. That clearly shows that the trust is under immense pressure to provide care to a huge number of widely dispersed people.

I will focus on the Alexandra Hospital in my constituency of Redditch. It serves approximately 200,000 people, is the county's centre for urology services, and has eight operating theatres, MRI and CT scanners and cancer unit status. It may appear on paper that the hospital is well resourced. However, the Care Quality Commission's most recent report, published in June this year, rated the Alex and the trust overall as inadequate, which is clearly a highly distressing situation. As a result, the trust is in special measures until further review, a status it has remained in since its initial inspection in November 2015.

Despite that status, I welcome that the trust is rated as good overall for its care. Feedback from patients, their families and friends is exceptionally positive in terms of their being treated with kindness, dignity and respect. My constituents in Redditch have often told me of their great personal experiences at the Alex.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. As a fellow Worcestershire MP, I agree wholeheartedly with her comments. While there are many concerns about our local hospitals, not a week goes by in which I do not get letters and calls from people saying how positive their experiences at them were. While a lot of things need to change, we should also recognise the hard work and dedication of many of the staff, who provide excellent service much of the time.

Rachel Maclean: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend's remarks. I am grateful to the Minister for his generosity in giving up his time to attend today, but I have some key questions for him. While a number of factors led to the trust being in this situation—the

debate does not have the scope to allow me to describe them all—what is important to my constituents is what the Department and other responsible bodies are doing to plan for the future. We want the trust to come out of special measures as quickly as possible.

A related but somewhat separate issue is the consultation on the future of acute hospital services in Worcestershire. The review of services in the trust began in January 2012 when clinicians across Worcestershire raised concerns about whether they could safely deliver services due to staff shortages. Those shortages meant that services had to be concentrated and centralised, owing to the provision being too small at each of the Worcestershire hospitals. Initial temporary emergency changes—births, complex emergency surgery, in-patient children's services, emergency surgery on children and emergency gynaecology moved from the Alex to the Worcestershire Royal Hospital—have now become permanent. Those changes will be the subject of the consultation proposals put to the board of the three Worcestershire clinical commissioning groups for approval tomorrow.

As hon. Members will understand, those two wide-ranging issues when taken together have been highly emotive for my constituents, as well as for Members for the rest of Worcestershire. The "Save the Alex" campaign in my constituency has gained huge community support, and I have nothing but respect for the dedication and commitment of those campaigners, led by Neal Stote and many others, who have campaigned extremely hard for more than 11 years. They have kept the Alex at the forefront of public debate in our area, and I look forward to working closely with them in future in the best interests of the people of Redditch and the whole community.

In their proposals, the CCGs told us that there are not enough staff or local demand to maintain services at the Alex. I understand that the Worcestershire Royal is a busy, modern hospital with an interesting caseload that is attractive to consultants and specialist neonatal nurses who want to develop their skills. I have also learned that the Meadow Birth Centre at Worcestershire Royal is fantastic. Since the transfer of maternity services, emergency C-section rates have dropped from 32.6% to less than 25%, meaning fewer expectant mums being rushed down corridors and more relaxed births. Having given birth four times myself, and having been a National Childbirth Trust worker, I am somewhat of an expert on birth, and I know that local women are fortunate to have access to that wonderful care.

I accept that the Worcestershire Royal provides the safest and best care for the women of Redditch and their babies, but we cannot ignore the fact that Worcestershire is a rural county and that Redditch has a very low level of car ownership. In fact, it is one of the lowest in the country, with one in five Redditch households having no access to a vehicle. Not owning a car or driving will be a cause of great stress in times of emergency, and for those who want to visit loved ones who have just given birth in Worcester, it will present difficulties if travelling with young children in tow. Additionally, I have heard from my constituents that, when they arrive at Worcestershire Royal, the facilities are sometimes not quite set up for their needs.

During the general election campaign, and now as a newly elected MP, I have talked to thousands of local people who have brought up the Alex time and again—I

have received numerous messages, emails, phone calls and comments on my Facebook and Twitter channels on this topic. Hon. Members will be able to imagine that, at every door I knocked on, the constituent said, “Let me tell you what the number one issue in Redditch is.” I already knew the answer: the Alex.

One young mum broke down in tears during my visit. She said that she had moved to Redditch specifically for the Alex, and had given birth to her first son there—a young lad who was now four. She suffers from a condition that means she is at high risk when in labour, needing almost immediate access to maternity services or her life would be at risk. She is therefore unwilling to fall pregnant again, even though she would like a second child. I find that situation tragic. While I have reassured her that our West Midlands Ambulance Service is the best in the country and would be able to transport her safely if needed, I would be grateful for confirmation from my hon. Friend the Minister that conditions such as hers have been taken into account in the clinical decision-making process.

Another problem that people raise with me is the rate of growth of Redditch as a town—it grew by more than 7% between 2001 and 2011. There must be something in the water in Redditch, because in 2012 there were 18,800 children, which is more than 22% of Redditch’s total population. It is a young and growing town with a lot of young people and children. On top of that, there are plans for new houses in areas such as Webheath. People are naturally worried that services at both the Alex and the Worcestershire Royal will not be able to cope in future, so I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister confirms that he has considered the projected rise in the population when making decisions on commissioning services in Redditch, which serve the populations of both Redditch and Worcester.

Specifically, will the Minister tell me at what level of population, and births-per-head in the population, he would review maternity service provision in an area? I have also questioned the Secretary of State on that point. Will the Minister commit to call for a review when the population reaches that level? Can he also give examples of comparable areas in the country that have successfully transferred maternity services to a neighbouring town or area, so that the people of Redditch do not get the sense that they are being unfairly singled out? My constituents would particularly like to know why services were centralised in Worcester instead of Redditch, and whether that process was carried out fairly and with all due process.

Another extremely worrying fact is the winter pressures faced in Worcester. The BBC reported in January 2017 that three patients died at Worcestershire Royal over the winter period after waiting on trollies for lengthy periods, which has been quoted back to me many times by residents. I heard, and continue to hear, many stories of people waiting on trollies in corridors for lengthy periods and in dirty conditions. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) in recognising the dedication of our NHS staff—the hard-working doctors and nurses doing their absolute best in such conditions—but the root cause of this problem lies not with them, but with a failure of leadership that goes back some time. That is not good enough. I call on my hon. Friend the Minister to provide much-needed assurances that robust and effective plans are in place to provide much better care for next winter.

As I previously alluded to, transport to Worcester is of huge concern to my constituents—my hon. Friend the Minister will find it challenging to drive between Worcester and Redditch on the M5 if he is unlucky enough to be stuck in traffic. What assurances can he give me that, if an ambulance providing transport in the event of an emergency transfer from Redditch to Worcester is unlucky enough to be held up in traffic, it will be able to care for a critically ill patient, baby, child or mum in labour? That is a priority for me and my constituents.

Although I am delighted that there is a free shuttle bus from the Alex to the Worcester Royal, I would like the Minister to join me in calling on the responsible authorities to ensure the sustainability and extension of that service. It could then serve more areas by making more stops over the diverse area that our county covers, as well as being more flexible and publishing its services more effectively. A lot of people in Redditch do not know about that valuable service, as I saw for myself when I knocked on doors in the election campaign.

The Minister will understand that one of the most difficult and emotive subjects is the treatment of critically ill children. Given the removal of accident and emergency care services for under-16s at Redditch, can he confirm that the new urgent care centre proposed for Redditch will be staffed 24 hours a day? What type of conditions will be treated there, and which cases will need to be transferred to Worcester? Can he confirm that, if children need to be treated in the urgent care centre, there will be enough fully trained staff to treat children, given that they are mainly serving an adult A&E population? Can he give any idea of the timescale for opening that urgent care centre?

One key problem identified by the CQC was leadership. I am very pleased that the trust has a new permanent leadership team, including a new chairman and a new chief executive. My Worcestershire colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Worcestershire, for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Worcester (Mr Walker), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid)—and I will meet regularly with the trust’s new chief executive, Michelle McKay, whom I have already met.

I welcome the reaffirmed commitments that the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) and the Secretary of State made to me of a £29 million investment in the Worcester and Alex Hospital sites, if the business case is approved this week by the CCG board. I would be most grateful to have more detail on what that will involve, when we will see it and what benefits it will deliver to Redditch.

What conversations has the Minister had with, and what support has he given to, the trust’s leadership team to ensure that the new chief executive can swiftly transition the trust out of special measures? Specifically, can he confirm what conversations his Department has had on the critical issue of staff morale? Low staff morale has in the past led to high staff attrition at the Alex, as I heard at first hand during the election campaign from a number of former and current staff members at the Alex. That has a knock-on effect on service delivery. I know from my experience of running a business that if staff are not happy and do not feel valued, it is impossible to achieve a good outcome in an organisation, no matter how much investment and resources are put into it.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. Does she agree that low morale and any hospital being in special measures has a knock-on effect on recruitment, because people are a bit more reluctant to start or pursue their careers in those hospitals? The challenges that that brings need to be addressed.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend touches on the key point of recruitment, which my colleagues and I, and himself, have raised with the new trust leadership. The trust has brought forward some interesting and exciting measures to address that, such as a new Facebook recruitment video. We look forward to seeing how that progresses and delivers more staff into this much-needed trust.

I am extremely grateful for the Minister's interest in this matter and for being granted the time to discuss it. I am especially grateful for the commitment shown during the general election campaign by his colleague the Minister of State, who visited me in Redditch. I call on him to lay to rest the pernicious rumour circulating in Redditch that our hospital is at risk of further downgrades or even closure. I am aware, as are some of my constituents, of the Naylor report, which contains in its numerous pages—they are too numerous to mention—proposals for selling unused NHS land to build affordable housing for NHS workers. That seems to me to be an eminently sensible suggestion, given the shortage of affordable housing in our country and the need for affordable homes for our public sector workers.

Some of my constituents have found suggestions in the report's pages—suggestions that I have not personally been able to find, despite assiduous reading over a number of hours, which I can confirm is a great insomnia cure, should the Minister be interested—that the Alex Hospital might be sold off for building land. I would be grateful for his confirmation that no suggestion is hidden in the small print of the report or elsewhere in any Government document that the Alex Hospital faces that fate.

As the Minister has been so generous in attending this debate, I would like him to go further by guaranteeing my constituents that Redditch will have a hospital that serves its population and is fit for the size of the town both now and in the future. Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for allowing me time to make my points. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): It was a pleasure, and I congratulate the hon. Lady on her address. I call the Minister.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. First, I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean); the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is responsible for hospitals, is on the Front Bench in the main Chamber taking part in the important debate on contaminated blood, to which she rightly referred. He has sent me in his place, so I hope I will do.

I will attempt to answer many, if not all, of the questions that my hon. Friend asked in the 15 minutes or so that I have. I congratulate her on securing the debate and on her recent election. I knew her predecessor well, and as she graciously said in her maiden speech,

she is some act to follow. She is a lovely person and I hope that she is doing well—I am sure that my hon. Friend is in touch with her.

Most of all, I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way she has tackled this issue in the short time she has been here and brought what she said on the campaign trail into the House of Commons and its various Committees—hitting the ground running would be an understatement. That is exactly why the people of Redditch placed their trust in her, and she is already a credit to them. I was in the House for her maiden speech, so I heard her refer to these issues and to the Alex in great detail. It reminded me of someone not so far from where I am standing now, who came to this House seven years ago and said that the future of Winchester's hospital would be his priority. I have tried to stick to that, as I am sure she will to hers. I have not seen a family quite so proud as hers, sitting up top to watch her make her maiden speech. I think her children and partner were there, and it was great to see.

I understand that my hon. Friend is deeply concerned about the performance of local health services at Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which has been in special measures since December 2015. On her first key question, I can reassure my hon. Friend and her constituents that Ministers keep a very—I emphasise “very”—close watch on performance at this trust and all trusts through the role of the chief inspector of hospitals, Sir Mike Richards. The Secretary of State put that in place, and it has made an enormous difference. My hon. Friend will know that, as she was able to join the Minister of State on his recent visit to the Alexandra Hospital during the campaign.

The recent CQC inspection report is clearly of great concern to my hon. Friend and to us, but I understand that the Minister of State was reassured to meet the trust's new chief executive twice since her arrival from Australia at the end of March. She now has a substantive team in place for the first time in many years, and we know from experience that strengthening the leadership team is a significant step towards taking any trust out of special measures.

NHS Improvement has taken active steps to help drive improvement at the trust. That includes bringing in Birmingham Children's Hospital, South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust and Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust to help address key areas of weakness and provide strategic, mentoring and practical support. An improvement director is also in place. That is the very least we expect, and I am pleased to report that it is happening.

Let me turn now to winter pressures. The Department has agreed to Worcestershire Acute NHS Trust's bid for £920,000 of capital funding for primary care streaming in A&E. That funding is intended to ensure that the trust has appropriate facilities in place for this winter, and I strongly encourage the trust to spend the funding as quickly as possible, within the constraints of good governance, so that it is ready for when the weather turns.

That capital investment is one part of the urgent and emergency care plan being implemented across the NHS this year to recover A&E performance during 2017-18. The intention of the national plan is to redirect patient activity to primary and community care through GP streaming, GP weekend and evening appointments, and

supported discharge and re-abllement in people's homes. Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust will benefit from these efforts to improve performance on delayed transfers of care—DTOC is one of the acronyms I have had to get to grips with in the past three years—as will other trusts.

Let me set the review of acute services, which my hon. Friend rightly mentioned, in the context of the Herefordshire and Worcestershire sustainability and transformation partnership. This represents a landmark attempt to address long-standing challenges to the provision of emergency care across the county, and to ensure sustainable A&E services and all other health services, because—we do not say this often enough—we are one NHS for the long-term future. The review of acute services has been incorporated within the STP, which is right. A draft was published in November 2016 and public consultation ran between January and March 2017. I will briefly outline the proposals.

The revised model would see 95% of patients experiencing no change in the way they access services in Worcestershire and all three of the county's acute hospitals remaining open. Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust would also retain its two A&E departments at Worcester and Redditch and the minor injuries unit at Kidderminster. Worcestershire Royal Hospital would become a specialist centre to support emergency and complex care, and the Alex in Redditch would provide more planned care.

Under NHS England's proposals, both A&E departments, at the Alex and at Worcestershire Royal, would remain open 24 hours a day. However, due to the transfer of in-patient children's beds, the A&E at the Alex would be for adults only. Both the Alexandra and Worcestershire Royal Hospitals would have new 24-hour co-located urgent care centres, which would treat adults and children with minor and moderate illnesses and injuries.

I must emphasise that no decision has yet been made regarding these proposals. As my hon. Friend said, the governing bodies of the three Worcestershire clinical commissioning groups will hold a meeting in public tomorrow, when they will each consider the decision-making business case and then make a decision on the recommendations. Depending on the outcome of that meeting—I have a funny feeling my hon. Friend will attend—the next step would be for the trust to go to NHS Improvement for approval of its outline business case. If successful, the next stage would be to commence procurement for the work and to take forward implementation of the clinical model. Suffice it to say, it would of course have to have clinical support in line with the five tests that we and NHS England have now set out for any service change.

I am encouraged to learn that the trust is progressing its plans for a £29 million investment in improved facilities at Worcester and Redditch Hospitals, in addition to the almost £1 million awarded following the Budget to improve patient streaming for those attending A&E. It is proposed that this money should be used to improve the operating theatres at the Alex so that the hospital can be developed into a centre of excellence for planned surgery, to develop a women's centre at the Alex, to increase the number of beds at Worcestershire Royal, to provide a new children's outpatient department at the Alex, to improve endoscopy facilities at the Alex and to improve the ever-thorny problem of car parking at

Worcestershire Royal. I believe that the Worcester and Redditch are strong contenders for that proposed new investment funding, and my hon. Friend has made an extremely strong case for her constituency.

Let me touch on the Naylor report, which my hon. Friend mentioned—I have quite a lot of reading at the moment, but I will take seriously her advice about the insomnia cure that it provides. I assure her that I am not aware of any plans to dispose of the Alexandra Hospital. It does not propose closing any specific hospitals; it merely refers to where space and land can be released while continuing to deliver services. As my hon. Friend knows, the Naylor review was independent. Its report was prepared for the Department of Health and published in March 2017. As she would expect, my hon. Friend the Minister of State is considering its recommendations carefully and will respond fully in due course on behalf of the Government.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned staff recruitment and retention, so I will touch on the problems that the trust has faced in recruiting staff, especially at senior levels, and its resulting reliance on interim and agency staff. The trust has a new chief executive and leadership team in place. We have found from the experience of many other hospitals that have been in special measures that low morale and high levels of attrition are usually never about staff commitment; they are about getting the right leadership in place, which is why I place such emphasis on the new chief executive and her team. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State saw outstanding commitment from the trust's staff when he visited the Alex and the Royal last month.

Let me turn to my hon. Friend's concern about maternity services, which always touch the heart strings more than other hospital services. I of course recognise the strength of feeling in Redditch and, in particular, the concern about travel times to Worcestershire Royal. All hospital births in Worcestershire were moved on a temporary emergency basis from the Alex to the Worcestershire Royal in 2015 due to staff shortages. The safety of patients must rightly be our prime concern and I understand that the trust ran extensive recruitment campaigns for additional staff before this temporary decision was made. Worcestershire's maternity services form part of the review of acute services, which must be right.

The CCGs' published decision-making business case makes it clear that Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust must review the scheduling of its outpatient appointments and operations to take account of patients' travel needs and individual circumstances, and that the CCGs and the trust should work together with community transport providers in Worcestershire to provide an enhanced transport service between the Alex and the Worcestershire Royal. Decisions regarding those proposals are expected to be made by the governing bodies of the three CCGs at tomorrow's meeting. I encourage my hon. Friend—I do not think I need to encourage her too much—to support the CCGs to agree a plan at that meeting.

Engagement with staff and local people must continue to influence and refine plans at every stage of the process. That is a key principle in the local reconfiguration of services, and it is dead right that the process is guided by those who best know and understand the local area, which of course includes the clinical support I mentioned.

[*Steve Brine*]

In conclusion, I totally appreciate the concerns that my hon. Friend has set out so eloquently today, and I commend her once again for her work in such a short time in the House on local healthcare issues affecting her constituents and her own family, as she said in her maiden speech. I encourage her and her constituents to maintain an open dialogue with the local NHS, which they are doing, and I assure her that Ministers will continue to monitor the trust's performance very closely.

Question put and agreed to.

Leaving the EU: Disabled People's Services

4.28 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered consultation with disabled people on the effect on their services of the UK leaving the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hollobone. I start by thanking Disability Rights UK for its support while I was preparing for today's debate and for the excellent work that it continues to do on the impact of Brexit on disabled groups.

The Brexit debate in Parliament has to date focused largely on trade, access to markets and business objectives. Little has been said about the type of society we wish to be after Brexit, and even less about the impact of Brexit on groups in society such as disabled people and on their daily services and human rights. Today's debate in Parliament is therefore important, because it highlights our need to consult widely and to think tangentially about Brexit. Fundamentally, Brexit is not just about markets and money; it is about people. To work for everyone in our society, Brexit must therefore be inclusive. For disabled people, Brexit must have equality legislation and vision placed at its heart.

Disabled people make up one in five of the UK population. That is a significant sector of our population that will be affected by the legislative changes flowing from the UK's decision to leave the EU. It is therefore incumbent on the UK Government to consult disabled people and their organisations on post-Brexit Britain. How extensive is the consultation likely to be and what should be the remit for a consultation with disabled people on Brexit? We are concerned about the very real potential for Brexit to have a significant impact on the ability of disabled people to live and work independently and with dignity in our communities.

Many of the rights that are upheld for those living with a disability have their foundation in European Union law. Examples include the 2000 employment equality directive, which requires member states to prohibit disability discrimination in employment; the 2006 air passenger rights regulation, along with similar regulations on rail, ship and coach travel, which require disabled people to be given assistance when travelling in the EU and European economic area; and the 2004 medicinal products for human use directive, which requires the packaging of all medicinal products to include Braille labelling to make them accessible to disabled people. Indeed, the groundbreaking European Accessibility Act is currently being negotiated at EU level. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that it will benefit disabled people by providing common rules on accessibility in relation to computers, ATMs, ticketing machines and banking services. In the last few years, there has been a really strong set of initiatives from the EU, with accessibility very much part of the EU strategy, which impacts on the UK in a host of areas.

We ask ourselves what will happen to the financial support—the millions of pounds—that the EU provides from the European social fund to support a range of schemes and support for those living with a disability. Will successive United Kingdom Governments continue that important support? Will they set out how they will

do so? Will they guarantee continued support for disability services post Brexit to disability rights groups and organisations, which currently benefit from that funding?

Understandable concerns have been raised about the settlement criteria proposed by the UK Government. It is alarming that disabled people from other EU countries might be disadvantaged when it comes to establishing a right to permanent residence in the UK. If the criteria are to be employment based, what of disabled people with fluctuating conditions, who may require breaks from employment? Consultation on settled status must be carried out with disability groups to ensure that disabled people are not excluded from settled status purely by virtue of their condition.

The impact of Brexit on NHS and social care staffing levels is a great concern. Adequate access to health and social care is vital for many disabled people, but with all the new implications that Brexit brings for EU citizens in terms of gaining work permits for the UK, and with EU workers perhaps deciding to leave the UK because of those conditions, there will be inevitable and undue strain on services. Recent reports show that, post Brexit, the UK may be a much less attractive proposition for EU workers, particularly skilled workers, and that healthcare could be one of the hardest hit areas, with a staggering 84% of workers in that sector from EU countries saying that they will leave the UK. For Scotland, that is also worrying, because according to the most recent figures, 5.8% of the health and medical workforce are non-UK but EU passport holders, and experts tell us that losing EU workers will have a significant impact on our NHS workforce.

How will disabled people be able to access the care packages and support and NHS treatment that they need in the light of the potential exodus? Many EU nationals are already considering leaving the UK. Will the Minister tell us what plans are in place to deal with the potential shortfall in staff, and address the extremely important concerns about the criteria?

Many disability rights groups across the UK have expressed concerns about the level of support and, some would say, the lack of understanding and compassion shown to those living with a disability, who have suffered as a result of UK Government policy, such as the cutting of the employment and support allowance work-related activity group component by £30 a week and the tightening of eligibility for personal independence payments. Those measures have pushed more disabled people into poverty and potential social isolation. Concerns about what life in the UK will look like post Brexit for people with a disability must be taken extremely seriously. Given those recent events, it is understandable that many disabled people are beginning to feel quite alarmed. The implications of Brexit and the potential impact on disabled people, which we will hear about today from many hon. Members, need to be addressed urgently by the Minister and the UK Government.

I was today given a briefing from the Guide Dogs association on the effect on disabled people of the UK leaving the EU. It makes key points to which I would like the Minister to respond. It states:

“The UK’s withdrawal from the European Union has the potential to have a serious impact on the safety, mobility and independence of people with sight loss, by placing at risk two key areas:

Disability awareness training for bus drivers

The audibility of electric and hybrid vehicles”.

Will the Minister respond to those points? I understand that EU regulation 181/2011 is due to come into effect in 2018 and requires all bus drivers to undertake disability awareness training. That regulation was due to come into force in 2013, but the Government used a derogation to delay its introduction. Guide Dogs says:

“We are now concerned that the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union may mean mandatory training will either not be brought into effect, or later translated into UK regulations once the UK has left the EU.”

Training for bus drivers is badly needed. It ensures that drivers are aware of the needs of passengers with sight loss and respond appropriately. In a 2014 survey, only 14% of respondents said that a bus driver always responded appropriately to their needs as a disabled passenger. To tackle social isolation and people’s very important need for independence and mobility, those issues must be addressed.

The concerns expressed today are very real. We need commitments from the Minister and the UK Government that the rights of those living with a disability will not be diminished or eroded over time. We need to know that the financial support for disabled people that is in place from our EU membership will continue; that those from other EU countries will not face discrimination if they choose to seek settled status; and how the Minister will address the seemingly inevitable shortfall in those who provide support and care for the disabled in our communities and NHS. Recruiting and retaining workers in the social care sector is already challenging, but Brexit could precipitate a shortfall that becomes a crisis.

I ask the Minister to ensure that, as the Brexit negotiations unfold, the rights and needs of those living with a disability are central to discussions and negotiations. Post-Brexit considerations may seem of most significance to trade, but they are also of fundamental significance to people, and ultimately to the inclusiveness and the nature of our society for those with a disability.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I see no Back Benchers standing, so we will go straight on to the speeches by the Front-Bench Members. I take it that you are the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, Mr Linden. Normally there is a limit of five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, but I think we can be far more liberal—with a small “l”—this afternoon. You cannot speak for as long as you like, but you can speak for longer than five minutes.

4.39 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to see the generosity once again of Kettering, which I know you are proud to represent in this Parliament.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. There are a number of issues and policies that have been forgotten about in the heat of the Brexit campaign. It is only now, as we start to work through what the British people have delivered, that we as legislators begin to see the job on our hands. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done, particularly with the all-party parliamentary group for disability.

[*David Linden*]

I have a number of points that I want to make, but my fundamental approach is that Brexit could have a hugely detrimental impact on the ability of disabled people to live and work independently and with dignity in the UK. The UK Government need to reassure us that disability rights groups will be consulted on decisions every step of the way. The main themes I want to touch on from the outset are that EU law has played a vital role in upholding the rights of disabled people across the EU; that the EU also supports, both financially and through co-operation, initiatives across the EU to support disabled people in member states; that concerns are now starting to be raised about the possible impact of the UK Government's proposals for settlement criteria given the often fluctuating conditions of disabled people; and that disability groups have stressed the impact that a fall in the number of NHS staff as a result of Brexit will have, particularly on social care. I visited Greenfield Park care home in Carntyne in my constituency just two weeks ago, and that point came up and was well made. The UK Government must ensure that disability rights groups are consulted fully on any potential impact of Brexit on services that those groups use.

My hon. Friend touched on the European Accessibility Act, which is currently being negotiated. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has said that it will benefit disabled people by providing common rules on accessibility in relation to computers and operating systems, ATMs, ticketing and check-in machines, as my hon. Friend mentioned. The proposed Act would require domestic provisions to allow consumers and interest groups to take action under national law. It would require authorities within member states to have the power to restrict, prohibit or recall offending products and services. Manufacturers would be required to produce information relating to complaints, compliance and product recall. When we consider the effort that has been put in, it really does ring true, and I hope that the Minister understands just how serious this is. In giving evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee, Anna Lawson, Director of the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds, said:

“In terms of accessibility, in the last few years there has been a really strong set of initiatives from the EU. Accessibility is very much part of the EU disability strategy. It is embedded in a whole raft of legislation and policies, which impact on the UK in areas such as transport, procurement, social funds and websites. There is a new one coming in on public websites.”

There is real cause to look at the support that the EU provides financially and through co-operation initiatives to support disabled people in member states. Disability organisations such as the Papworth Trust have said that the EU provides millions from the European social fund to support a range of schemes for disabled people such as work experience, wage subsidies and support for the self-employed. At this stage, in extending a hand of friendship across the House, I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who held an excellent event recently for Mencap on how we get disabled people into work. I know the Minister was present at that, and I hope that it will be factored in to these strategies as well.

I want to talk briefly about my hon. Friend's concerns about settlement, because concerns are now starting to be raised about the impact of Brexit. Disability Rights

UK interviews have highlighted that disabled people from other EU countries might well experience disability-related disadvantages when it comes to establishing a right to permanent residence in the UK. The UK Government have published a document on the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. It suggests that EU nationals will apply for a new settled status, but does not provide further fulfilment criteria. I hope that the Minister will touch on that.

I am mindful of time and do not want to detain the House much longer, but there are two other points that I want to raise. The UK Government must ensure that disability rights groups are consulted fully on any potential impact of Brexit on services that they use. This Government need to realise that decisions they make on Brexit will have a very significant impact on disabled people, whether they are about social care, establishing the right to residence, or a loss of vital funding. We know that the last Parliament demonstrated a staggering contempt for disabled people who are on low incomes, with legislation cutting the ESA WRAG component by £30 a week as well as tightening the eligibility for PIP.

As we embark on what will be the most challenging time for us as legislators in this country, we need to have the rights of disabled people first and foremost and front and centre. I hope that the Government will do that.

4.45 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. Can I start by congratulating the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I hope I have pronounced that correctly—on securing this timely debate? I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for contributing this afternoon.

During the referendum campaign relatively little was said about the impact that exiting the EU would have on disabled people, their rights and their services. With some notable exceptions, not a great deal more has been heard since. That is a big mission. It is crucial that this issue receives the attention it deserves, not only because Brexit is ultimately about people—the outcome of the negotiations will impact on every aspect of our national life and everyone living in this country—but because the outcome of the most difficult and complicated negotiations that this country has undertaken since the second world war could have serious implications for the more than 10 million disabled people in the UK and their families. That is why the Opposition have consistently called on the Government to ensure that the priorities of disabled people are at the heart of their approach to the Brexit negotiations.

Indeed, the fact that Brexit will affect disabled people in specific ways is precisely why we sought to amend the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill to ensure that the Government considered the impact of withdrawal on protected characteristics—including disability—by means of detailed equality impact assessments. Sadly, they used the majority they enjoyed at the time to vote down that amendment. Now that the article 50 negotiations are formally under way, it is more important than ever that the Government make it clear, to an extent that they have not done to date, that

the voices of disabled people are being heard and that their interests will be championed throughout the Brexit debate.

The comprehensive Disability Rights UK consultation and manifesto clearly sets out the range of concerns felt by disabled people in relation to Brexit. There is far more in that report than I can hope to cover in the short time available to me, but I want to touch on a couple of the main issues that both the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman have raised, and put a series of questions to the Minister that add to theirs. They both spoke passionately about their concerns for the future of disability rights once the UK has left the EU. I know that the repeal Bill will not be published until Thursday, and the Minister will be limited in what she can say, but can she give some sense of how the Government intend to consult with disabled people and disability rights groups when it comes to converting EU disability law into UK law, particularly in terms of corrections undertaken by means of secondary legislation? What means of redress does she envisage being available to disabled people to enforce their rights once we have left the EU? Can she confirm whether the Government's intention is to keep pace with any positive developments in EU disability law that occur after our exit? The European Accessibility Act, which is making its way through the European legislature, is a case in point.

Both the hon. Lady and the hon. Gentleman mentioned funding. Brexit clearly jeopardises the funding provided by the EU to disabled people's organisations and to projects that directly benefit disabled people. Will funding be honoured for such projects signed before or after the autumn statement of last year, financed either under the social fund element of EU structural and investment funds or by means of the European regional development fund? Will the Minister offer some clarity about the funding prospects for these projects after 2020?

Both hon. Members touched on the potential impact of Brexit on our health and social care system. There is particular concern among disabled people that a sharp reduction in the number of EEA/EU personal assistants and carers could have a detrimental impact on independent living. Where that sort of support is reduced, disabled people could be forced to choose between residential care and living at home with inadequate support. We do not want to see either outcome.

Can the Minister clarify whether her Department, the Department of Health or the Department for Exiting the European Union have undertaken any assessment of the impact of exiting the EU on the health and social care workforce on whom disabled people rely? Will that impact assessment and that issue be taken fully into account during the drafting of the forthcoming Immigration Bill?

We have touched on the impact that exiting the EU will have on the rights of UK citizens abroad and EU nationals living here at home. It has the potential to become a serious concern and challenge for the Government, because many EEA/EU citizens either act as full-time carers for family members who are UK nationals or live here of their own accord but are unable to attain permanent residence because the Home Office does not consider them to be working persons exercising their treaty rights. The Government's recent offer to UK nationals made no mention of disabled people or their carers, so there are understandable concerns that

those individuals will not qualify for settled status. What assurances can the Minister give about safeguarding the position of EU citizens in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU, so that disabled people and their carers will not face unequal treatment?

To conclude, disabled people are worried about the risks that Brexit poses to their hard-won rights and the services that they value. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about those issues and others of concern not only to disabled people but to the disability rights groups, such as Disability Rights UK, that advocate on their behalf.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am sorry, but the Minister will have to tear up half her speech, because she has only 36 minutes of time available. Would she be kind enough to conclude her remarks no later than 5.27, to allow Dr Cameron three minutes for a winding-up speech?

4.51 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I think I can manage that, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for securing this important and helpful debate. I put on record my thanks, and those of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his Ministers, to Disability Rights UK for the welcome and helpful work that it has done on the manifesto. I also thank the other Members who have contributed to this discussion.

I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that this is not just about markets and money. I say that not just as a politician or an avid leave campaigner. I have gone the length and breadth of the country, and I know the public think that Brexit is more than markets and money. They voted to leave or remain for a variety of reasons: for this country's potential to have a positive effect in developing nations, which could have huge benefits for the disabled community overseas; for all sorts of societal reasons; for the primacy of international humanitarian law; for skills training in the UK; and for lots of other reasons, including additional funding for our public services.

As we talk about Brexit in this place and consider what we need to do as we exit the EU and how to maximise and lever all the opportunities that will come with it, we must talk about a broad range of issues that matter to the public, of whom disabled people form a large cohort. In research done by the Papworth Trust last year, a randomly sampled survey showed that 54% of disabled people voted to leave. Clearly, the community has clear ideas about what it wants us to secure and protect as we exit the EU.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for referring to that important piece of research. My understanding of the Papworth Trust's research is that many disabled people voted to leave based on the consideration that additional funding might come to the NHS, and therefore to their care. Does she not think that that shows how important it is that we recognise the needs and care of disabled people in our Brexit negotiations?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree completely, and I will address the issues that the hon. Lady and other Members have raised during this debate.

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

Members have spoken about services and about strengthening rights and supporting disabled people to reach their full potential, whether through employment or by other means, and play their full part in society. The decision to leave the EU does not change those priorities. Government officials are comprehensively considering the impact of the transition on disabled people.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Many disability activists—including Muscular Dystrophy UK's Trailblazers, a group of young disabled campaigners tackling social equality issues affecting young disabled people, such as access to transport, higher education, employment and social and leisure opportunities—are concerned about the potential impact of leaving the EU on their human rights and ability to live independently. They want to know whether the Minister will guarantee whether all rights for disabled people contained in EU directives will be incorporated into the repeal Bill.

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, certainly. I will come to the detail in a moment, but absolutely. The repeal Bill, contrary to what its name might suggest, is about transferring those rights into UK law.

As we have a little time, let me give an example of the direction that we want to take. A muscular dystrophy trailblazer—in fact, the muscular dystrophy trailblazer of the year, a fantastic young woman called Lauren who is a fashion student—inspired some changes that we have made recently to the Motability scheme. She got a fantastic work opportunity overseas that she felt she could not take because of the admin that she would have to do on returning to secure her Motability car. We have changed the rules for that scheme to enable anyone who has an opportunity to live overseas for a long period—a sabbatical, a work experience opportunity, romance or whatever—to do so without being prevented by our admin. We listen to disability organisations extremely carefully. As young people like her seize greater opportunities through more global trade and business relationships, we should ensure that admin in our Departments keeps pace with them rather than being an obstacle.

My Department, the Office for Disability Issues and other Departments are supporting DExEU in its aims. As negotiations about our future relationship with the EU progress, the Government will ensure that any impact on disabled people is taken into account. As part of its work to uphold rights and equalities, DExEU's stakeholder engagement team is working with civil society groups and disability organisations and their members to consider the broad range of those issues in detail. DExEU officials have already met a number of organisations, including Mencap and the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group, and some of their membership.

Officials are also developing plans for further engagement across the sector, including meetings with the Disability Charities Consortium, with which DExEU is currently liaising to ensure that officials and Ministers are hearing the sector's concerns. There will also be direct engagement with other groups run by and representing disabled people. DExEU Ministers are keen to hear from any disabled people or disability groups who want to draw their attention to any aspect of the matter.

David Linden: I get the impression from the Minister that the Government are in listening mode. May I therefore extend an invitation to her, and indeed to DExEU Ministers and officials, to come to Glasgow for a meeting with the Glasgow Disability Alliance, which has done excellent work with its manifesto to get these issues on the agenda?

Penny Mordaunt: I would certainly be happy to do that. I am always happy to visit, although it may have to be during the recess. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), has responsibility in this area and responsibility for Scotland. I am sure there will be opportunities to talk to him directly.

Throughout the negotiations, Ministers and officials are holding meetings with the business community and others about a variety of issues. I know from my own sense check of DExEU that the materials that may be needed to support those meetings, such as documents in accessible formats, are in good order.

DExEU's engagement with stakeholders will ensure that our commitment to equalities through the transition remains steadfast. Indeed, we hope to use the EU exit as a potential opportunity to create standards that are higher than the EU's in many areas—I know that the Disability Charities Consortium is particularly keen on looking at such opportunities. To support this work, DExEU will share with colleagues in other Departments, including me in the Office for Disability Issues, the insight gained from its stakeholder engagement on this and other matters. Brexit is a cross-cutting issue, and the Government are co-ordinating work to ensure continuity for everyone in this country in the wake of the legislative transfer. In our relationship with the EU, the UK has been a leader on many equality issues. I hope we will continue to hold that leadership role even outside the EU.

Let me address some concerns mentioned by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. Our standards on rail vehicle accessibility for disabled people were used as the model for EU-wide standards. That is just one example. On bus driver training, which she mentioned, the EU regulation came into force on 1 March 2013 and training has to be put in place within five years. As she will know, the Department for Transport has been doing an awful lot to ensure not just that the right legislation is in place, but that bus drivers are trained and that the standards of customer service that people enjoy on public transport are maintained. My Department is supporting that work. One of our disability sector champions, Jane Cole, is promoting good practice on disability awareness training—I place my thanks to her on the record.

I hope we maintain our leadership role. The UK has some of the strongest equalities legislation in the world, including the Equality Act 2010, which enshrines equality in domestic law. A huge focus of my Department is on ensuring that that law is enforced, because we cannot rely on people having to sue organisations to enforce it. We have some new opportunities to achieve that, particularly by utilising technology. That is one way in which the Office for Disability Issues can support this agenda.

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) raised the ESF. For projects signed off after the autumn statement, which will continue after we leave the EU, funding will be honoured by the

Treasury. We expect those projects to provide value for money and to be in line with our domestic priorities. We want leaving the EU to mean that we can take our own decisions and set for ourselves the policy objectives that were previously targeted to gain EU funding. The Government will continue to consult stakeholders to review EU funding schemes in the round and ensure that any ongoing funding commitments best serve the UK's national interests.

Dr Cameron: Has there been any discussion of whether the funding that was received from the EU will be matched in the long term?

Penny Mordaunt: For projects that are already ongoing, the funding will continue. That will be honoured by the Treasury. In a way, the European social fund is the easiest issue to grapple with, but a large focus of DExEU's work is on other issues. Future projects that meet the objectives of the Government of the day and that offer good value for money will be funded by the Treasury. New as well as continuing projects will be dealt with in that way. However, we are well aware that the UK's third sector has mapped the fact that it relies on funding from all sorts of other sources than the European social fund. DExEU and the Equality and Diversity Forum have a project that is looking at how to ensure that the sector will not suffer, and that leaving the EU will not be detrimental to the funding that goes into those projects.

My office is looking across all areas at how to enable the third sector to derive a greater income. Understandably, we have cracked down on all sorts of fundraising—chugging and so forth—that the sector has done over many years and that the public are concerned about. However, these organisations provide amazing services to some incredibly vulnerable people. We have to enable them to continue to provide those services and, ideally, extend their reach. In every aspect of our work, we are actively doing more work in partnership with the sector and more co-funding, enabling those organisations to derive a larger income for the services and support that they provide. That is a particularly important project that does not get a lot of airtime, whereas understandably the social fund does.

On freedom of movement, there are opportunities for disabled people. It has been too easy to neglect not just the vocational and skills training that people need, but things like independent living support that we know people need in order to thrive and undertake meaningful activity and work. The negotiations on freedom of movement as we leave the EU will force us, and will force business, to look at our labour market strategy. There are some opportunities to be seized as we leave the EU.

The hon. Members for Greenwich and Woolwich and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow focused on healthcare and social care, which are obviously incredibly important. I point them to the manifesto, which paid particular attention to EU nationals working in our NHS and the priority we wish to give them. I also underline the work on social care that is going on across Government. Understandably, the media have focused on social care for older people, but we are also looking at social care for those of working age, who do not get a lot of press attention. My office is heavily involved—hon. Members will see more of that in the near future.

The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich made a point about the Home Office. As in the preceding debate, hon. Members will have to make do with the Minister in the Chamber, but DExEU is the co-ordinating Department. However, I am sure that I can commission either DExEU or the Home Office to answer in detail on visa applications and support requirements for people who wish to come here.

With regard to my own Department, I will point to what we have done for other groups. One of the first things that I did was to amend the rules on the past presence test for refugee children who had a disability. I felt that, if we were taking refugees and they had particular needs, we should meet them. I point to that as evidence that we are very aware of our responsibilities and I undertake to ensure that either the Home Office or DExEU update the hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, and for Greenwich and Woolwich, on the specific points about visas.

In the time that I have left, I will just touch on some other points. It is important to put on the record as well that we are going through a process of examination by the United Nations regarding the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. That also affords us some opportunities, and I am undertaking a piece of work in my Department to consider how we can use the principles set out in the convention to enshrine them in the heart of the work of every Government Department. As I say, that convention affords us some opportunities, and that work will be a very encouraging and positive exercise.

We have other considerable opportunities as a result of leaving the EU. I am hotfooting it from Westminster Hall over the road to launch a paper with Localis on a sector deal in the industrial strategy on disability. There are some tremendous opportunities that join up all the agendas that hon. Members have spoken about today on employment, our ambitions on international development and all sorts of things, and on harnessing the tremendous innovation, the science, and the research and development that goes on in the UK, whether it be in assistive technology, design or all the things that we showcase at the global disability innovation hub not far from where we are today. We have tremendous opportunities that not only play into growth, jobs, markets and money but do so much more.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for being generous in giving way once again. Will she meet the all-party group on disability to discuss its recent inquiry report, "Ahead of the arc", which examines some of the important issues that she has referred to, including industrial strategy and why disability rights and employment for people who are disabled should be at its core?

Penny Mordaunt: I am always happy to meet that group and I await an invitation.

In closing, I thank hon. Members for their contributions today. I hope that, as legislation is introduced and as negotiations progress, we can continue to keep the issues of specific interest to disabled people high on the agenda. I am very encouraged by what DExEU has done to date and by its plans for the future, and I encourage disabled people and their organisations to engage with the process. Only then will we get a Brexit that we can be proud of. I thank the hon. Lady for playing her part in that today.

5.14 pm

Dr Cameron: I thank hon. Members for taking part in the debate today, and I thank those on the Front Benches for their thorough responses. As we have heard, research indicates that many disabled people voted for Brexit. That shows that we cannot let disabled people down—we must honour promises that have been given. Many disabled people voted for Brexit believing that it would enhance the future provision of their services, so we must uphold their rights, their support, their services and their opportunities. We must ensure that those

things are maintained, prioritised and continued; that we in the UK are always ahead of the curve when it comes to disability rights and never fall behind it; and that all funding is maintained.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered consultation with disabled people on the effect on their services of the UK leaving the EU.

5.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 July 2017

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

Euratom Membership

9.30 am

James Gray (in the Chair): Members will have noticed that there are a large number of people here, and a large number of them have put in to speak. I do not feel inclined to apply a formal time limit yet, but roughly speaking there will be two or three minutes per Back Bencher. It would help if Members kept themselves to that limit; I reserve the option of bringing in a formal time limit later if they do not.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered negotiations on future Euratom membership.

I declare an interest as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on nuclear energy. I want to make it clear from the outset that this debate is not a rerun of the EU referendum debate or of the article 50 debate. This debate is about getting it right and ensuring that the UK remains a world leader in civil nuclear and in research and development.

We achieved world leader status by co-operating with others across the world under the umbrella of Euratom—or, to give it its full name, the European Atomic Energy Community. Euratom was established in the 1950s as part of the creation of the European Community. It provides the basis for the regulation of civil nuclear safeguards and control and supply of fissile material, and funds international research. The Culham Centre for Fusion Energy is one of the leading research centres in the world. The Government have indicated that Euratom and the EU are legally joined. Some say that we have to give the same notice to exit Euratom as we did to exit the EU through article 50. I disagree.

I was a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which held a comprehensive inquiry into how Brexit will affect energy. We looked at the single internal energy market, Euratom and meeting our climate change commitments. We heard evidence from across the board. Euratom was raised by many experts who work in the civil nuclear field and in research and development, as well as by academics. We received hard evidence that there is contradictory legal advice on the matter. In fact, the advice is diametrically opposed. Many believe that just because we are a member of the same institution, we must have the same jurisdiction. That is in dispute, and I put it to the Government that there are ways forward that would mean there did not have to be a cliff edge when the article 50 negotiations are complete. I sought this debate to ensure that we get the best deal possible, that we get some transitional arrangements, and that the industry is happy.

In the light of the new consensual politics that the Prime Minister has announced, will the Minister—I ask him to make a note of this—set up a working group with industry and academics, and consult Parliament,

to ensure that we have the appropriate arrangements in place so that the nuclear industry and those involved in research and development can plan for the future?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I understand that this debate will focus largely on the nuclear industry, but I am concerned about the impact on medicine. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the concern of the Royal College of Radiologists that an inability easily to bring isotopes into the country could affect half a million scans and 10,000 cancer treatments? Isotopes cannot be stored, because they have a short half-life, so we need Euratom.

Albert Owen: I absolutely agree. I have had a lot of correspondence from experts across the field, including the Royal Marsden Hospital, where cancer research is vital. As the hon. Lady says, it is absolutely essential that we get that right. This is not about the dogma that we must leave an institution; it is about ensuring that medical research continues, that we maintain high standards, and that we have the framework to move isotopes and do the things that she mentions.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman not just on obtaining the debate but on his constructive tone, but why should the case for staying in Euratom not apply to every other agency that we will leave when we leave the European Union? As we leave those other agencies and regulatory bodies, we will set up our own, under international standards. Why can that not also be done with Euratom? Who would want to frustrate that?

Albert Owen: No one wants to frustrate anything—quite the contrary. I am trying to set the tone by saying that we need a long-term plan. I am worried that there will be a cliff edge, and that we will have to leave an organisation that has served us and the whole global community well for many years just because we leave the European Union. I repeat that experts have said that we can legally decouple Euratom and the EU. I think that doing so would improve our chances of getting a better agreement. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman that we would have to deal with every other agency. In a sense, Euratom is pretty unique, and the industry and experts—not politicians, but people who understand the industry—are worried about it.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Since the problem is that Euratom is legally joined to the European Union, can the hon. Gentleman tell us how many European Court of Justice cases Euratom, in its long history, has been involved in?

Albert Owen: The honest answer is very few. I do not know the exact figure—I am sure that the Minister, whose civil servants are here, has it at his fingertips—but there have been very few. My point, with which I think the right hon. Gentleman agrees, is that it is not legally essential for us to leave Euratom just because we leave the European Union. I am not a lawyer, and others argue that it is, but when I was on the Select Committee I heard contradictory evidence from the experts. I do not want this uncertainty to continue; I want to create certainty for future investment in civil nuclear and in research and development.

[*Albert Owen*]

Let us be frank: as I think the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) alluded to, our reason for leaving Euratom is that No. 10 has red lines, one of which is ending the jurisdiction of the ECJ. That is one of the reasons—it is a political reason, not a legal reason, and it was made almost as an excuse—that was given for us leaving the EU and Euratom together. That is the argument that the Select Committee heard in evidence.

Politically, we need to move forward, and we must have frameworks in place for doing so. Three options have been put to us: just remaining in Euratom, extending our period of membership and getting a transitional arrangement; having associate membership; or having third-country membership. If people read the detailed Library note, they will see that those options are very doable. I am trying to base this debate on actual facts that the Committee heard in evidence, rather than emotional arguments about whether we should leave or remain a member of Euratom.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As the hon. Gentleman knows, I represent the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority's Culham establishment. He mentions associate membership, which is considered a valid compromise by the management of Euratom, but there are two models: the Swiss model and the Ukrainian model. Does he have a feeling about which way the decision will go? Will he join me in encouraging the Minister to make a decision pretty quickly?

Albert Owen: What is important for future investment is not what I think but what the industry thinks and what the experts have told me. I am looking forward to the Minister's reply, but I will outline in detail those three options: remaining in Euratom, associate membership, and third-country membership. The hon. Gentleman's description of the Swiss and Ukrainian models is a bit crude, because different countries are involved. The Swiss enjoy associate membership, but other countries, such as Japan, the United States and Canada, have a different relationship. I want the best relationship for the United Kingdom. If it ain't broke, why start fixing it? That is where I start from.

Those options do exist. Alternative membership under article 206 of the European treaty allows the UK to leave but to continue co-operation, as the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) argued, and establish an association involving reciprocal rights and obligations, common actions and special procedures. However, that will take time, and I do not think that the timeframe set out by triggering article 50 is helpful; it will hinder rather than help, and put at risk many new build projects.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. Does he agree that exactly because of the exposure that the French Government have to our new nuclear programme, and indeed to EDF's business in the UK generally, we have an excellent ally in Paris in trying to ensure that whatever our new arrangement with Euratom is, it comes about quickly, because that is in the French interest as much as in ours?

Albert Owen: It is in everybody's interest because this is a global industry, but we must put the UK interest first and argue from a UK perspective, because we are

making the decision to leave and we do not expect everyone else to do our bargaining for us. We need to have a strong position, which is why I am arguing today that we need transitional arrangements in place that suit us. We cannot rely on French investment going forward, but we can create and maintain the high levels of skills that we have in this country, and the high level of investment.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab) *rose—*

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) *rose—*

Albert Owen: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and then to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). However, I am conscious of time.

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. I think he is about to touch on the heart of the issue. If we leave Euratom—and the uncertainty about that in the meantime—that risks high-paid, high-skilled jobs going overseas, which we cannot afford right now. Our membership of Euratom is key for the future of our civil nuclear defence industry.

Albert Owen: I totally agree. That argument was made to the Select Committee by a representative of workers, because they are concerned about training, skilling and upskilling.

Robert Neill: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the need for us not to have a cliff edge to preserve the benefits of membership. The associate membership he mentions might be one such way, and France might be a supporter of that. Is he aware that Austria has objected specifically to the support that the Government have given to Hinkley Point on state aid grounds and has generally been hostile to powers in the EU with nuclear programmes? Would an associate arrangement require unanimity among the EU 27, or a qualified majority?

Albert Owen: Alternative membership under article 206 is important. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Austria, which is hostile to nuclear per se and will be taking over the presidency of the European Union. That could put other things in jeopardy as well as these arrangements. That is all the more reason to have a long-term plan, rather than exiting in two years and linking ourselves to article 50. I think he strengthened my case in many ways.

I am talking about the alternative arrangements for membership, enjoyed by Switzerland and others, which importantly would allow access to moneys to fund nuclear research to be maintained. However, I want the whole package: I want research and civil nuclear to have certainty going forward. The other option I talked about was third-country membership under article 101 of the Euratom treaty. That is more limiting in scope, with regard to power and jurisdiction, than the alternative memberships. However, it does allow agreements and contracts with international organisations and states. Those with third-country membership include, as I mentioned, Japan, the United States and Canada—big players in the nuclear world. However, we would need bilateral agreements with them, which again will take time to negotiate. Many people have raised with me

concern about the timeframe. Of course, third-country membership would not automatically give us the right for international contracts for research under the international thermonuclear experimental reactor project. That is therefore probably more risky than alternative membership. It is an option, but it brings risks with it.

Those options are better than the cliff edge. It is not politicians who are raising that; it is a broad section of the nuclear industry and a broad section of cancer research and development as well as various other issues, such as those raised by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and mentioned by me. This is not just about new nuclear, existing nuclear and the movement of nuclear materials; it is far more wide-ranging than that.

The three options are: remaining in Euratom, associate membership, and third-country membership. However, whatever the model and the negotiations of the Minister and his team, we need proper transitional arrangements to be in place. That is the crux of my argument, and I feel that the Members who have intervened share my anxiety that we must have a proper framework.

The Minister is new to his job, and I welcome him to it, but he and his Department have yet to allay the fears of industry or of those in research and development. He has a job of work to do, and I am trying to help him to become firmer in saying that he will work in partnership with industry. A working group is the right way forward, because that would allow for consultation with the experts and for the industry to look seriously at the pitfalls and advantages to allow us to have a world-class leading industry going forward.

I am sure that the Minister will grasp this new consensual politics and listen to me and to hon. Members across the House. We want to help him get it right. We are not here just to criticise; we are here to assist. The industry is waiting to assist as well, so that we get a full and comprehensive consultation and timescales that suit the industry in the UK and UK plc. In the nuclear industry we are about all the research and development that has been talked about, but we are also about producing low-carbon energy and high-quality jobs.

Very few industries have jobs for life like the nuclear industry does. Many people go to the industry and are there for life and get that continuity and those high-skilled jobs. We need to maintain that if we are to meet the criteria that the Department set out in its industrial strategy on nuclear and how those link to a broader industrial strategy. We need to improve and upscale jobs. The nuclear industry is one such area, and if we are not careful we could take a step that takes us backwards, not forwards.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend—Mr Energy Island—on securing the debate. Will he comment on how many jobs in the nuclear industry are distributed around the periphery of the country and how important those jobs are to areas such as the north of Scotland, the north-west, north Wales and the south-west? There are concerns from across the United Kingdom on this issue.

Albert Owen: I agree that many of the existing and potential new nuclear sites are on the periphery, but we also have in Oxfordshire and many other counties of the United Kingdom huge investment that we need to

improve and move forward. I also mentioned the Royal Marsden, which has given me a briefing on nuclear's importance to the city of London. It is the whole United Kingdom. The industrial strategy talks about spreading wealth across the whole United Kingdom, and here is a good example of where that works, so we should continue that and not take risks.

I mentioned nuclear's importance to low-carbon and to skills, but we are also at the forefront of research and development. We need to maintain that, but I believe that we could hinder that if we were to have a cliff edge or to exit Euratom just because of a timetable and legal reasons.

James Heappey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Albert Owen: Yes, but this will be the last intervention I will take.

James Heappey: The hon. Gentleman has been generous, especially in indulging me twice. He mentions our technical edge. Before he sits down, can I encourage him to mention our position as a world leader in fusion power generation? That is the Elysian fields of future low-carbon generation. I know that he will want to remind the Minister of just how successful we have been in leading that research and how important it is that we remain in the vanguard.

Albert Owen: I know that other right hon. and hon. Members want to make their pitch, so I will not repeat my opening remarks, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and has made the point for me, and the Minister has heard it.

I have based my speech on evidence that I heard as a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and I pay tribute to its previous Chair. I am making a bid for that position today, so I may as well take advantage of being on my feet for 20 minutes in this debate. The Committee did a serious piece of work on the pros and cons of exiting the European Union, whether for internal markets or supply.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Albert Owen: Yes I will, because I am standing for election.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful. The UK has been awarded £500 million of contracts in the nuclear fusion supply chain. Is not all of that put at risk if we leave Euratom?

Albert Owen: Absolutely. The hon. Lady was also a member of the Committee, and she knows the written and oral evidence we received that highlighted that point. It is important for a Select Committee to hold the Government to account, but it is also important to shape the framework and work with the Government. I urge the Minister to work with Parliament, the industry and all relevant sectors, so that we can go forwards, not backwards, and maintain the status of which we are all proud. The UK is a world leader. Let us put politics to

[*Albert Owen*]

one side and get the transitional arrangements right. Let us work together to ensure that the UK stays at the top.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. My suggestion of self-restraint to two or three minutes per speech, until 10.30, when I intend to call the speakers who will wind up, starts now.

9.51 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (*Albert Owen*) on securing this important debate.

The nuclear industry is important to the north Wales region, as it is to the whole country. However, I take issue with the hon. Gentleman because he said that the decision to leave the Euratom treaty was taken on political rather than legal grounds. He will know from the helpful briefing note supplied by the Nuclear Industry Association that that is disputed. The view I take is that the Government had no option but to leave the treaty.

It is worth analysing the way in which the relevant treaties have moved. The Euratom treaty was extensively amended by the treaty of Lisbon, although it continues to have a separate existence from the EU treaties. Most significantly for the purpose of this debate, article 106a of the Euratom treaty, as amended, now provides that article 50 of the treaty on European Union, which of course provides for the departure of a member state from the EU,

“shall apply to this Treaty.”

Article 106a also provides:

“Within the framework of this Treaty, the references to the Union...or to the ‘Treaties’...shall be taken, respectively, as references to the European Atomic Energy Community and to this Treaty”—that is the Euratom treaty. Thus the Euratom Community and the European Union share a common institutional framework, including the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, a role for the Commission, and decision-making in the Council.

That common framework is acknowledged not only in the treaties but in domestic British legislation. Section 3(2) of the European Union (Amendment) Act 2008 provides that any Act that refers to the European Union

“includes...a reference to the European Atomic Energy Community.”

The position, therefore, is that article 50 notice of withdrawal from the European Union would automatically have operated as a notice of withdrawal from the Euratom treaty. That is acknowledged by the British Government, and, just as importantly, it is the position of the European Community.

I must therefore take issue with the hon. Member for Ynys Môn. I acknowledge the importance of the industry, but we need to look at the legalities, which appear, on balance, to have been accepted by the British Government and the European Union. Although I fully agree about the need to avoid the cliff edge, I think that the Government are fully aware of the matter and will address it. The hon. Gentleman’s suggestion, which has been made repeatedly recently, that the decision was political, was ill founded.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): When my right hon. Friend talks about avoiding the cliff edge, does that mean he would support a transition period while we remain members of Euratom?

Mr Jones: The Government’s position has always been that there should be an implementation period, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will acknowledge that and outline what the Government will do. My purpose in speaking in the debate is simply to point out that the suggestion that the prime considerations are political is essentially unfounded.

9.55 am

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (*Albert Owen*) on securing the debate.

I shall speak briefly, as you stipulated, Mr Gray, and will focus specifically on the future of Moorside and NuGen. I welcome the Minister to his post. He will no doubt have spent a substantial part of his time so far in the Department trying to save the NuGen deal and find a new investor—almost certainly backed by a foreign Government and foreign capital—to save a development that will create 21,000 jobs in Cumbria and potentially contribute up to 8% of the UK’s energy.

I hope for a frank assessment of how the Minister feels about the cloud of uncertainty over the industry, which has been created by the Government’s until now steadfast refusal to countenance remaining within a treaty that is working well, or to consider something sensible such as associate membership, and a seamless transition to that. What effect does he feel the situation is having on the dash to find a new investor to save the deal? We know the difficulty behind the scenes in trying to get some countries, which I will not name, to consider rescuing the deal. Aside from any damage to UK energy security, the collapse in job prospects would be a calamity for the region. We need the Government to take an approach that gives the best chance of securing the investment at a difficult time. We have a new Minister and the Government apparently want to consider sensible clarifications and improvements to legislation: now is the time to change course.

9.58 am

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (*Albert Owen*) on securing this incredibly important debate, and the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on his comments about Moorside, which is of course in my constituency, as is Sellafield, the world’s first nuclear reactor. My constituency is home to some 67 NIA members and I must declare an interest as my husband, father and brother work in three of those businesses, along with 14,000 other people in my constituency. It has been said that 76% of the working people in Copeland borough work directly or indirectly for Sellafield.

Our nuclear expertise is internationally renowned and our safety record is exceptional. Ensuring continued membership of Euratom, or swiftly acting to develop an alternative, to be in place upon leaving the European Union or as part of a planned transition period, is vital. Because of the nature of the Sellafield site, Euratom safeguards are of key importance to its functioning. Every day, Euratom officials monitor activity on site

and ensure that fissile nuclear material at Sellafield is in the right place and is being used for its intended purpose. Euratom owns cameras and other equipment and of course has the skills to carry out the work. If we leave, the ownership of that material and the skills will need to be replaced.

The Nuclear Safeguards Bill should provide clear answers, but they would answer only one of many problems that withdrawal from Euratom may cause. Sellafield's reprocessing facility has reprocessed fuel from several countries across the EU and further afield, including the United States and Japan. The ownership of that material needs to be determined during the negotiation, and new nuclear co-operation agreements to move materials overseas post-Brexit will need to be agreed and ratified.

Whatever the decision taken, and whether we are in or out of Euratom in March 2019, safeguarding has to continue under international law. What cannot happen is a scenario in which new safeguarding measures and new co-operation agreements are not in place. Safeguarding is critical for the nuclear industry, and particularly for Sellafield. Without an approved safeguards regime, as well as new bilateral co-operation agreements, nuclear trade to and from the UK would stop, or at least slow down, which would be economically crushing for my constituency—a community that is home to thousands of nuclear workers and, indeed, the centre of nuclear excellence.

I thank you for allowing me the time to speak in this crucial debate, Mr Gray, and I urge the Minister to give this consideration. I also welcome the excellent suggestion of a working group from the hon. Member for Ynys Môn, which I would be very pleased to be a part of.

10 am

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Gray. I thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for securing this important debate. I, too, have to declare an interest: my husband's brother works at Trawsfynydd power station in my constituency. I add my voice to those warning the Government about what a Euratom exit means for safeguarding. Please bear in mind that livestock movements in my constituency were held back for 26 years following the Chernobyl disaster; we have experience of the effect of nuclear safeguarding issues, if you like.

Since 1957, Euratom has underpinned our nuclear safety and security, and our nuclear industry has benefited from well-established regulations that enable us to be a trusted partner of our European counterparts. Leaving Euratom would mean creating our own safeguarding regime—something the UK's Office for Nuclear Regulation has already confirmed as impossible by the nominal EU withdrawal date in 2019. Furthermore, it would mean renegotiating every bilateral agreement Euratom has managed on behalf of the UK. Those are incredibly complex agreements, called NCAs—nuclear co-operation agreements. Each NCA can take three years to agree, and without them, the UK will be isolated from the legitimate international nuclear community.

That takes me to my second point: the economic consequences of withdrawal on the development of Trawsfynydd and the nuclear industry, and low-carbon energy security as a whole. Euratom ensures the safe

and unimpeded cross-border movement of nuclear materials, technology and even expertise. As already noted, withdrawing from Euratom would mean lengthy renegotiations to allow that trade to continue. Without Euratom, ventures such as the development of SMRs—small modular reactors—at Trawsfynydd look less attractive, meaning a worse deal for local communities, the UK and its position in the international nuclear community.

My third point is on the cost of withdrawal on our scientific research communities. On Monday, the Prime Minister blithely stated that the UK would be able to access Euratom research and funding as a third-party state. However, she failed to mention that the relationships between Euratom and its third-party states vary widely, and therefore VIP access is not at all guaranteed and would require lengthy negotiations. In the meantime, our existing plans for world-leading projects, such as at Trawsfynydd, would be disrupted.

I therefore join in the cross-party calls for the Government to reconsider withdrawal and the models put forward today, and I welcome the suggestion of a working group that works closely with the industry.

10.3 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As I mentioned in my intervention, I represent the Culham UKAEA establishment. The urgency to resolve this issue is that Euratom's work programme runs out in December 2018. The European Commission is pushing hard to negotiate terms for the 2019-20 programme, but the fly in the ointment is Austria's taking over the EU presidency in June 2019. Of course, as has already been mentioned, Austria is notoriously anti-nuclear, and it is therefore urgent that an agreement should be in place by June 2018.

Ministers have apparently written to the Commission to continue with the JET—Joint European Torus—project, and to commit the UK's share, which has gone down very well. Everything has been delayed to accommodate Brexit, and willingly so, but there is a need to get a move on with this. Staying a full member of Euratom provides the best continuity to that programme.

I do not believe that the legal issues are as black and white as has been set out. However, associate membership with bespoke terms is a perfectly acceptable compromise. That would mean that there would be a transition period that would leave us as full members of Euratom until 2020. There are two principal models of associate membership: the Swiss model, which includes freedom of movement for nuclear scientists and the use of the European Court of Justice, and the Ukrainian model, in which there is no free movement of nuclear scientists and for which the Ukrainian courts decide disputes. The Government need to make their mind up quickly on that in order to provide the certainty that the industry needs.

There is a lot at stake. UKAEA is targeting £1 billion-worth of work on ITER—the JET project's replacement in the south of France. That is £1 billion of work against the UK's £85 million investment. It is important to bear those sort of figures in mind when we come to look at the future of Euratom and the sort of relationship that we have with it.

10.6 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert

[*Daniel Zeichner*]

Owen), who I thought spoke with a great depth of knowledge about this subject. For those of us who are not so close to the industry, I will talk about the scientific and some of the legal issues, some of which have already been raised, but there is an elephant in the room: to many of us, it seems as though the debate is being driven by what many of us see as the Prime Minister's longstanding antipathy towards the European Court of Justice. It seems to me almost like a fetish in some ways, because there has to be some way to resolve disputes. I often look to football for inspiration; most things can be related to football in my view. It needs a referee; people may sometimes feel hard done by, but when there are disputes, there has to be an arbitrator. The Government seem intent on bringing their own referee to the table, instead of playing by the rules. We have to have some way of resolving these issues.

One issue we have already heard about is the possibility of associate membership of Euratom, and we all want to hear much more from the Minister about that. However, if we are going to talk about associate membership, we also need to hear something about whether the Government can provide the same assurances for other areas of crucial scientific research, such as our relationship with the European Research Council, the European Research Area and the Horizon 2020 programme.

Just last week, the Government made an extraordinary policy announcement in the pages of the *Financial Times*, in which two Secretaries of State recognised the need for us to stay close to European Union regulatory systems in the life sciences sector—an announcement that some of us feel might have been more appropriately made in Parliament first. It is true to say, however, that a direction of travel is emerging on all of these issues, even if the proper destination has not yet been arrived at.

10.7 am

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Very simply, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on introducing the debate, because his attitude was extremely constructive. There are a lot of issues associated with matters of this kind, and it is important for us both to be practical and to stick to the legal position. I very much agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr. Jones) about the legal position; in fact, it is endorsed exclusively by the European Commission. After the BEIS Committee report, which was published on 2 May, the Commission published a position paper on 22 June stating:

“On the date of withdrawal, the Treaties, including the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community...cease to apply to the United Kingdom.”

I think that is definitive; the Commission takes that view.

However, the other aspect to this is that we have to find an answer to these questions, and we have to be constructive about it at the same time. The legal position is clear, but the question is where we go from there. We are bound by international conventions to our membership of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and it is my belief that the same applies to the EU. I therefore suspect that there is common ground here, in which all the rules are effectively already converging. If that is the

case, as I think it probably is, there is a basis on which we can move forwards to some form of co-operation. I very much take up the view of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn regarding a working group. That is an interesting idea, and I think it would be consistent with working towards something like associate membership.

I would like to say much more, but in a nutshell the question of jurisdiction is cropping up the whole time in respect of citizens' rights, our trade arrangements and so on. There is a consistent pattern in how we resolve these questions as we move into negotiations. As I have said in the House several times, I believe that there is a means whereby, without prejudicing or rejecting our judicial sovereignty and Westminster sovereignty, we can take a common-sense approach, by adopting a tribunal. The tribunal could have on it, for example, a retired European Court judge, a retired Supreme Court judge and an independent judge. In other words, through such a tribunal we could try to find a constructive answer through some form of international agreement whereby we can all be satisfied, instead of shouting at one another. The law is clear, but we need to look for constructive solutions.

10.10 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I commend the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for securing this very important debate.

I have an interest in this subject because of my constituency. In Abingdon, many of the workers at the Joint European Torus facility are very worried about what is going on and feel they have been forgotten in the last few months. I am delighted that today, they get a chance to be heard.

My former profession was physics teaching, so if I may be indulged, I would like to explain why nuclear fusion is so important. While fission is the splitting up of large isotopes to create smaller ones, releasing energy, fusion is the joining up of smaller ones to create large ones, also creating energy—and what is amazing is that the base material is water. When we are done with it, the end products have barely any decay half-lives. It is an extraordinary technology, and—make no mistake—if we get it right, it is as scientifically significant as sending a man to the moon. It could solve climate change completely, because water is essentially an inexhaustible material. I would like to make the case for that, because I think it has been forgotten. Humanity needs that technology—I do not think I am overstating it—and it is vital we get it going.

It is covered under the treaty, not only because of the work programme, to which the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) referred, but also because afterwards we have ITER. If we are going to access that supply chain and not lose the expertise of those scientists, the best thing we can do is give them certainty. I have visited the site several times and been told that there is already movement among the scientists to leave. They need to know now what is going on, because it will soon be the summer holidays, and they are deciding what to do for their families. If their jobs are not secure, they will leave. Compounded with the issues around which EU citizens get to stay here, that means literally hundreds of jobs are on the line.

I would like to ask the Minister, on behalf of my constituents, what he is doing to ensure we do not have any of these cliff edges. Will he assure us that if he cannot negotiate the replacement treaties in time, he will extend our membership of Euratom until such time that we do? Is the plan right now to have associate membership? Surely he can tell us what the Government are looking at. Will he also confirm that the reason we are in this mess is the Prime Minister's obsession with the European Court of Justice? I applaud the constructive nature of this debate, and the fact is that if we just decided to get over that, we would avoid this mess entirely.

If I may, I would like to explain why the radioisotopes issue is such a big one. The Minister and the Government keep saying that it is not covered by the treaty, but I refer them to page 66 of the Euratom treaty. Line 2 clearly states that the very same radioisotopes, technetium-99m and molybdenum-99, are covered by the treaty. We cannot make those in the UK, so if we are to import them—that is the only way we can get them—they are covered by the treaty. Will the Minister agree with the industry that that is at risk and also reassure cancer patients that diagnostics and treatments will not cease?

10.14 am

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am very pleased indeed that Euratom is now getting the attention it deserves, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this debate.

It is wonderful to see the support that Euratom is getting outside the Chamber—for example, from former Conservative party leader William Hague, writing in *The Telegraph* yesterday. It has also been on the front page of the *Evening Standard*; *The Times* today came out in favour of Euratom; and no less a luminary than Dominic Cummings, the man who ran the leave campaign so effectively, has used quite strong language—he nevertheless makes his point effectively—to argue that we should not leave Euratom. The reason, of course, he shares that view is that Euratom has nothing to do with our leaving the European Union.

This is a debate not about stopping Brexit but saving our membership of Euratom. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), the former Brexit Minister, pointed out, we served our intention to leave Euratom on a technicality. It was quite clear that the Government had received legal advice that put it into their mind that it might be an ineffective serving of the article 50 notice if we did not serve notice that we were also leaving Euratom. The trouble that those of us who support our membership of Euratom have is that none of us has seen that legal advice. It is obviously unprecedented for the Government to publish legal advice, but it would be very useful at the first meeting of the working group, which no doubt the Minister will announce in his remarks, to have some distilled version of the legal advice that the Government received on the link with Euratom.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Without wishing to go over old scores, the right hon. Gentleman will no doubt remember that the Government were also given legal advice that there was absolutely no need whatsoever to have a parliamentary vote on triggering article 50.

Does that make him wonder whether the Government's legal advice on this should be subject to some scrutiny before it is implemented?

Mr Vaizey: That is a very effective point. It is certainly the case that those of us who wish to remain in Euratom will now seek our own legal advice, but it would be nice to know where the Government stand on this. The other point that has emerged is that no assessment has been made of the impact of leaving Euratom or, rather, of the Government's current position, which is to leave Euratom and then rejoin it. The Government are being offered a time-saving opportunity.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that continued membership of Euratom would not in any way preclude the striking of free trade deals or controlling our borders, which are the stated aims of Brexit?

Mr Vaizey: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. One Member asked earlier why we are singling out Euratom from other European institutions that we will leave as part of the process of leaving the European Union. The key point is that our membership of Euratom is under a treaty separate from our membership of the European Union.

Sir William Cash: I just want to reaffirm something. The Commission's position paper, dated 27 June, is quite unequivocal about the fact that when notice is given, we cease to be members of Euratom and also the EU under article 50. That is quite clearly set out in the Commission's position paper.

Mr Vaizey: We remain members of Euratom, as we remain members of the European Union. We served our intention to leave, but there is many a slip between cup and lip. I hate to mention this name in august company, in case it sets off an argument, but it was interesting to see Juncker's chief of staff today pointing out that he has never made a comment about our membership of Euratom. In terms of his general approach to Brexit and our not having our cake and eating it, he specifically said on Twitter today that that does not include Euratom. There are huge opportunities here, and we all stand ready to help the Minister.

10.18 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. It is quite clear that the legal position is not clear. That stems from the fact that the Euratom treaty is not the same treaty signed in 1957 as the EU treaty. Leaving Euratom would involve separate negotiation of the arrangements for co-operative or associated status alongside any other negotiations in the EU. That is fairly clear.

In that context, I want to raise a concern that I hope the Government have considered, but I suspect they have not, about leaving Euratom under those circumstances and the status of the Hinkley C nuclear power station programme. In autumn 2016, the Secretary of State signed an investment agreement—charmingly known as a SoSIA—concerning Hinkley C with EDF, the French Government and the Chinese Government that contains a number of issues relating to what a qualifying shutdown

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

occurrence would consist of as far as the progress of Hinkley C power station is concerned. That investment agreement defined that a qualifying shutdown occurrence would consist of a Government intervention in the working of Hinckley Point C power station, or its construction, or if the EU were to do that, or if there were a change in treaty arrangements relating to the construction or operation of the power station. If we left Euratom unilaterally, as is proposed, with no alternative position in place, it is likely that that would mean a qualifying shutdown. The effect would be a possibility of the other contracting parties to the arrangement—EDF and others concerned with the power station—walking away from the deal and claiming up to £20 billion compensation for so doing. That seems to be an important consideration that we might think about. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the Government have considered the risk of that occurrence.

That concern is not just mine; it was raised by the National Audit Office in its June 2017 report on Hinckley C. It indicated that it thought that the Government had not undertaken any risk assessment relating to the Secretary of State's investment agreement and that perhaps they should do so. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether that risk assessment has been undertaken and whether the Minister considers that the Secretary of State's investment agreement on Hinckley C would be at risk as a result of what has been decided so far about leaving Euratom.

10.22 am

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this important and valuable debate. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that Euratom brings great benefits to this country.

We should do all that is legally possible to maintain those benefits by whatever means it takes. We should not allow any thoughts of ideological purity to get in the way of achieving that. My judgment is that if we can legally remain within Euratom, we should do so. I understand the points that were well and eloquently made by my right hon. and hon. Friends who have suggested that legal advice goes against that, but it would not be the first time that Government legal advisers have been shown to be wrong and it would not be the first time that the Commission's legal advice has been proved wrong.

Alex Chalk: If there is political will, any legal obstacle can be easily overcome.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is my next point.

Unless the Government seek clarity—there is a dispute among lawyers about the matter—the likelihood is that an interested party may itself seek to litigate and it would be much better if the Government seized the initiative and said that politically they wanted to stay in and would do whatever is necessary legally to achieve that objective. That would be altogether better. If they cannot achieve that, certainly an association agreement

would be the next best thing and I suggest it should be the Swiss model because the small amount of jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice is a minor price to pay for the benefits. I cannot believe that anyone would object to the very modest movement of skilled nuclear scientists who only benefit this country. Otherwise, we would be cutting off our economic and scientific nose to spite our political face and we should not do such a thing. That would be a good compromise, but we should stay in until such time as that is in place because we cannot have any risks in the interim.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): If the Minister is unable today to give the legal certainty of being able to stay in Euratom, which is what my hon. Friend is looking for, does he agree that we need a commitment today from the Minister that the Government will pursue a solution that replicates the benefits of Euratom membership as closely as possible?

Robert Neill: We must certainly do that and we must be flexible about the means by which we achieve it. There may be ways forward and my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) made a constructive point about a tribunal being one way forward. I take that in the spirit intended. Equally, the jurisprudence of the ECJ on Euratom matters is so discrete and so technical that it should give no offence to anyone, unless they are a complete purist about maintaining that jurisdiction.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about a discrete and specific area. Does he agree that when people voted in the referendum last year, they voted on particular issues? I do not know of one moment on any doorstep when Euratom came up and people said they were voting for Britain to leave. They put their trust in the Government and Parliament to make sure that as we go through the process we do not do anything to jeopardise our interest for the future economy.

Robert Neill: I am sure that is the case; it did not come up on the doorstep for me. I spoke to a biochemist in the health service over the weekend who voted to leave, but said he certainly did not think we would go about leaving in such a rigid fashion that we would run into difficulties like this. The Government should change our approach to leaving in this and other matters.

I hope the position is clear. We all want the best possible outcome on this. The Government should seize the political initiative and seek to stay in if possible. If not, it is clear that we must go forward, but there must be no gap. It is more important that the Government deliver on that political objective than worry too much about some of the niceties.

10.26 am

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The sentence that I think sums up how we got into this mess came from the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who said that we have to start getting answers to some of these questions. How about getting answers to the questions before we had the referendum, or how about Members asking those questions before they trooped through the

Lobby to vote for the shortest and most destructive Act that this Parliament will ever pass, and possibly the only Act of Parliament for which the explanatory notes were half a page longer than the Bill? The fact is that the first full day of debate on the triggering of article 50 lasted almost 11 hours, and Euratom was mentioned once by a Conservative Back Bencher—hats off to the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). His mention of it came nine hours into the debate.

The Government's entire White Paper on leaving the European Union devoted only eight sentences to Euratom. It is described as an important priority for the Government—so important that it is mentioned on page 44, paragraph 831. Even then, there is no recognition whatsoever of the need for life-saving medical isotopes, which were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is no longer in her place. She has had an illustrious career saving lives in the NHS using radioisotopes. Without the Euratom treaty, the United Kingdom will have no—I repeat “no”—reliable source of those radioisotopes.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that plenty of countries outside Euratom have easy access to medical isotopes and that there is no reason why, if we leave, we will suddenly become an international pariah and be denied those treatments?

Peter Grant: I accept that membership is not essential, but this is not the only item on which we need negotiations finalised and ready to implement within a ridiculously short and entirely self-inflicted timetable. If Euratom were the only thing the Government had to negotiate between now and March 2019, there would be no problem. But there are areas that will have an essential long-term impact that the Government will not have time to negotiate properly in order to get the best possible deal. With a bit more candour from the Government about how difficult that process will be, we might all be better off.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to be candid about all the costs of the various options being explored—associate membership, third-country membership and remaining in Euratom—and about the difference in costs? We know that during the referendum campaign a lot of inaccurate information was circulated about the cost of remaining and the associated benefits of leaving. We need some frank information about the costs associated with retaining membership of Euratom or leaving.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Peter Grant: I fully agree with the hon. Lady. The figure of £357 million comes to mind for some reason—it must be because I got the bus to work this morning. There has not been the necessary degree of openness and detailed debate on any of this. That is why one of the biggest mistakes was to call the referendum and then have the vote in such short order. We were told repeatedly by the Conservatives that we had been talking about this for years, but we have not been talking about the detail in relation to important agencies such as Euratom, the European Medicines Agency and many others.

It is good to see, albeit belatedly, so many Government Back Benchers now demanding that the Government do what some of us were asking them to do beforehand. All I can say to them is this: “The next time you want to demand that the Government do something different, please do so before voting for the Bill that makes it impossible for the Government now to listen to what you are asking for.” I say that because the Government are now claiming that we are in this situation because their Back Benchers, some of whom are here today, voted obediently for the article 50 Bill, without any queries about the implications for Euratom and other important institutions. Members here who are bemoaning the impact of that Act need to go home, look the mirror and ask themselves what responsibility they have.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: I am about to finish and cannot give way again.

Those hon. Members need to ask themselves, “What responsibility did I have for this mess, and what can I do to ensure that I don’t allow obedience to the Whips to make me vote for such a disaster in future?”

Several hon. Members rose—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I congratulate most hon. Members on keeping to time, but I do apologise to the four hon. Members whom I cannot call because of lack of time. We now move on to the first of the three winding-up speeches.

10.31 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing this important debate. He made a clear case for the importance of remaining either a full or an associate member of Euratom. Many hon. Members spoke about their own constituency interests, and I will mention a couple of those. One of the most telling comments came from the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who said, “If you ask people on the doorstep why they voted leave, would it be because of Euratom?” Of course people are unaware of what Euratom does; they are probably unaware even of its existence. However, it is fundamental to our everyday lives.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Is the hon. Lady really saying that we can develop a list of all the organisations that were not mentioned in great detail during the referendum campaign, and that we must remain part of them just because we have not had that full and open debate? Actually, we voted to leave the European Union; that is what the British people voted for. We have to do that, and if it entails leaving Euratom, so be it, but we will do it on the best possible grounds, with a transitional period.

Carol Monaghan: The hon. Gentleman’s first point is the correct one: yes, give us a list of everything that we have agreed to leave, and let us start working out the mess that we have created.

Suella Fernandes: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way again; I know that she wants to continue with her comments. It is clear that the British people did vote last year to take back control over our laws and for freedom from the European Court of Justice, the Commission and the Council; and of course the EU and Euratom share an institutional framework through the ECJ, the Commission and the Council. Does she not think that by remaining a member of Euratom we would be going against what the British people voted for?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely not. In the Scottish National party we do not share the love of nuclear fission that those on the Government Benches seem to have, but it is a fact that we have nuclear facilities in Scotland. Scotland's future lies in renewables—last year, 59% of our energy needs were met from that source. However, although we are moving towards a target of 100% renewables, we still have nuclear facilities and they still need regulation and materials. Although nuclear safety is a reserved matter, regulation of waste and emissions from nuclear sites is devolved, but it appears that, once again without any consultation with the Scottish Government on the implications for future regulation, we are being dragged out of Euratom as well as the EU.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Lady agree that not a single European Court judgment has compromised any British interests relating to Euratom, because they have all related to technical aspects and details of the treaty?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. I do not know about all the European Court judgments, but that certainly is not something that many of us have heard anything about. Euratom has operated very successfully for 60 years, but now we seem to be taking ourselves out of the regulatory framework.

Kit Malthouse: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Carol Monaghan: No, I am going to make some progress.

Any future negotiations on whatever membership of Euratom we might have—I hope that it is full membership, but there could be associate membership—must include the Scottish Government, as they are dealing with the regulation of nuclear facilities in Scotland. Some people have talked about putting our own regulatory framework in place. Of course, we could get our own regulations in place, but the problem is that the clock is ticking, we do not have a lot of time and producing these frameworks takes many years, not 20 months. That is a real issue.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned medical isotopes. The Euratom Supply Agency ensures the security of supply of medical isotopes for all members of Euratom. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) gave us some statistics. She said that 500,000 diagnostic scans and 10,000 cancer treatments are carried out annually as a result of those isotopes. However, we cannot produce our own medical isotopes and must therefore import them. Medical isotopes have very short half-lives, which means they need to be transported quickly, and there are only a few facilities in

the world that produce them. A number of the reactors that produce medical isotopes are coming to the end of their useful lifespan, which means that in future there could be real problems with their supply worldwide anyway. This is not the time to take ourselves out of the agency that ensures that we have a supply.

Layla Moran: Does the hon. Lady agree that the real issue with these radioisotopes is that their half-lives are so short that any delay in getting them to the UK—even hours—means that they will have expired?

Carol Monaghan: As a fellow physics teacher, the hon. Lady will know that something such as technetium-99, which is used in medical diagnostics, has a half-life of six hours, which means that after 24 hours it is pretty much useless, or its activity has dropped to a level that makes it inert. These isotopes must be transported and used very quickly after they are produced.

The hon. Lady has already given us a physics lesson on fusion, so I will not do that, but fusion is a field in which we are world leaders in the UK. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about JET in his constituency. It is one of the world's most important facilities and one of Euratom's main facilities, so we need to ensure that funding continues. JET currently receives about £48 million annually. The contract runs to the end of 2018, so we must ensure that pulling out of Euratom does not affect future funding.

We must ensure that transitional arrangements for nuclear safeguarding, trade and funding are in place until the EU-UK negotiations are complete, and that should be done with the full consultation of the nuclear industry and community. We need to retain our membership of the European observatory on the supply of medical radioisotopes and continue to work with Euratom and global partners to mitigate any shortages of medical isotopes. We need to ensure that Euratom funding for our nuclear research projects continues. Finally, the UK Government must involve the Scottish Government at every stage of the negotiation process, to ensure that the deal reached works for Scotland's nuclear industry as well.

10.39 am

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Gray, for your rigorous chairing of this debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) on securing the debate and on the knowledge of and commitment to this vital sector that he demonstrated in his opening remarks. Those have been reflected by many of the Members who have spoken, from both sides of the House. They demonstrated the strength of concern that exists about this issue across party lines. The Prime Minister has called for some level of cross-party co-operation on Brexit, and in many ways today's debate has taken her up on that. Her response will show whether she is serious.

Many Members have spoken knowledgeably about Euratom's importance to the UK, and the worrying implications of a cliff-edge departure. Euratom has enabled the UK to become a world leader in nuclear research and development. The fact that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has decided to continue funding the JET facility in

Culham demonstrates that he recognises that too. That point was made very forcefully by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I was not given the chance to speak on this issue, so I want to ask my hon. Friend whether he is aware of the need for certainty about Culham's status to be provided within the year, given the need to avoid the Austrian presidency. We need answers very quickly on its continuation. Further, is he aware of the enormous expense that will be incurred if the Culham centre has to be decommissioned, rather than allowed to develop the practical technology of which it was, of course, a global pioneer?

Paul Blomfield: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which demonstrates her commitment to the Culham facility not only in her current role but in her previous job. She is right on both points. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon made this point forcefully: we need certainty now—not at some stage in the future, but now—because otherwise the facility is at risk.

Kit Malthouse: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that actually the biggest threat to fusion research in Europe generally is the stance of the European Union itself? Given that Germany has decided to phase out nuclear power, the hostility of the Austrians and the fact that the anti-science Greens now pepper the European Parliament and parliaments across the EU, the likelihood of Horizon 2020 funding continuing to go into nuclear research at the same level is very low, and likely to reduce.

Paul Blomfield: Those thoughts are contradicted by the enormous investment that the European Union has put into the Culham facility and is committing to.

Moving back to the benefits of Euratom, it oversees the transport of nuclear fuel across the EU and enables vital co-operation on information, infrastructure and the funding of nuclear energy. It provides safeguarding inspections for all civilian nuclear facilities in the UK—a point made well by the hon. Members for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who was right to say that if we get this wrong, it will have an economically crushing impact on the UK. Euratom is the legal owner of all nuclear material, and is the legal purchaser, certifier and guarantor of nuclear materials and technologies that the UK purchases. That includes our nuclear trade with the United States.

As has been highlighted this week and by other Members, including the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), Euratom also plays an important role in our NHS. A Conservative Member questioned that point, but I take the judgment of the Royal College of Radiologists, which has expressed genuine concern that cancer patients will face delays in treatments if supply is threatened. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) highlighted the National Audit Office report on the risks to Hinkley Point. In all areas, our membership of Euratom is vital.

Indeed, the Government stated that they want to replicate the arrangements we have with Euratom. They have talked about probably the exact same benefits, in

the way that they have about the trade deal they want in place of single market membership and customs union membership. It is an ambition that they have yet to demonstrate how they will achieve.

Outside Euratom, the Government would have to negotiate individual nuclear co-operation agreements with every single country outside the EU with which we currently co-operate on these matters. Those would be complex, lengthy negotiations within a 20-month framework. I am interested to hear from the Minister how far they have progressed on those. The Nuclear Industry Association has been clear that if we left without them in place, it would be a disaster—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who is a strong champion of these issues.

All this prompts the question: why add this whole other burden to run alongside the negotiations for our withdrawal from the European Union? The bigger issue at play here was summed up very well—I loved the football analogy—by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner): the Prime Minister's obsession with the European Court of Justice. In that context, it is deeply unfortunate that Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union have dodged today's debate. It is becoming something of a habit. We have had three debates in this and the main Chamber on exiting the European Union since the election. DExEU Ministers have dodged every one. That is an unfortunate habit, because both sides of this House demand a level of accountability that they are not demonstrating they are up for.

Back in February, I challenged the then Minister of State at DExEU, the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), about allegations that it was the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice that had led the Government to issue a notice to withdraw from Euratom alongside the notice to withdraw from the EU. In response he told the House, along much the same lines that he has repeated this morning, that this was not the case. He said:

“it would not be possible for the UK to leave the EU and continue its current membership of Euratom.”—[Official Report, 8 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 523.]

The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) have expressed the view, which many of us share, that legal opinions are never that straightforward. The hon. Member for Henley made that very explicit.

Mr David Jones: The hon. Gentleman mentioned me. He has heard what I have to say. I repeat that the advice that DExEU received was as I have outlined this morning. Does he accept that?

Paul Blomfield: I think that there are probably enough lawyers in this place to know that legal advice can go in many ways. It may well be that that advice was received by the Department, but other Conservative Members have made it clear that if the political will exists, a solution can be found.

Mr Vaizey: I do not mean to doubt the assertion by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) that that was the advice his Department received, but it would of course help the hon. Gentleman

[*Mr Vaizey*]

to agree with him if the Department published the advice that my right hon. Friend saw when he was a Minister.

Paul Blomfield: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I hope the Department will respond by publishing that advice.

Sir William Cash: This is not just a question of legal opinion; it is actually stated in the treaty itself. Article 106a of the Euratom treaty, as amended by the Lisbon treaty, unequivocally says that article 50 of the treaty on European Union—the article that sets out the procedure for EU withdrawal—

“shall apply to this Treaty.”

It is there in black and white. It is not a matter of legal opinion—it is just there.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. On the issue of cross-party consensus, I have to say that I was interested in his earlier contribution about looking for some sort of associate membership of Euratom, which might well involve the jurisdiction of the ECJ. We are making some progress, aren’t we?

Let me come to those in the Government who have contradicted the comments by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West in February. Comments by James Chapman, the former chief of staff to the Brexit Secretary, contradict that statement, and his comments were confirmed by the former Chancellor. They suggest that the nuclear industry, jobs and cancer treatments are being put at risk by the Prime Minister’s reckless and irresponsible decision to make the future of the ECJ a red line in all matters to do with Brexit.

Mr David Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: No, because I am conscious of time.

All this goes well beyond the issue of Euratom. As the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), who is no longer in his place, pointed out, it will affect our future in other agencies that we would also wish to be members of, such as the European Medicines Agency. We should start with the presumption that if these agencies are in our interests as a country, we would want to continue to maintain that membership.

We have already seen the obsession with the ECJ undermining discussions on the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and therefore those of UK citizens in the EU27. That obsession will also affect our ability to secure the objective that the Government have set themselves: the “exact same benefits”—I quote the Brexit Secretary—that we currently enjoy in the single market and the customs union.

I hope the Minister will agree to take back to his Secretary of State the clear consensus in this Chamber, and I hope the Secretary of State takes it to the Prime Minister. As James Chapman said, if the Prime Minister does not shift her position on Euratom,

“parliament will shift it for her.”

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My apprehension before this debate was not about the content of it, which has been first class and very constructive, but about having to pronounce in front of you, Mr Gray, the constituency of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who introduced it. I thank him and other right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House for their constructive comments.

The hon. Gentleman said that he wants constructive comments and debate, he wants certainty and he wants world-class arrangements for the future of the nuclear industry in the UK and our relationship with other countries. I absolutely agree. His suggestion for a working group was very interesting. My door is certainly always open to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, either collectively or individually. I have taken that approach in every job I have had and I will be pleased to continue with it—particularly in this case, since you have had to curtail Members’ contributions today because of time, Mr Gray. You did it very well, but I will not have as much time to answer them as I would have liked.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I will, but it will cut my comments down.

Liz Saville Roberts: It is good to hear that the Minister’s door is always open. I have already contacted him on matters relating to Trawsfynydd and have been refused a meeting. Would it be possible to arrange a meeting now?

Richard Harrington: I have never refused a meeting with anybody on any subject that I have ever been involved in, and I certainly have no intention of doing so to the hon. Lady. I really must make progress, but I am happy to arrange that meeting as soon as I possibly can.

The Government are determined that the nuclear industry in this country should continue to flourish in trade, regulation and innovative nuclear research. We are determined to have a constructive, collaborative relationship with Euratom. The UK is a great supporter of it and will continue to be so. There have recently been some alarmist stories in the press about what leaving Euratom might mean for safety and for health, but I must make it clear that we remain committed to the highest standards of nuclear safety and support for the industry. We will continue to apply international standards on nuclear safeguards.

We do not believe that leaving Euratom will have any adverse effect on the supply of medical radioisotopes. Contrary to what has been in the press, they are not classed as special fissile material and are not subject to nuclear safeguards, so they are not part of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, which is the driver of our nuclear safeguards regime. They are covered by the Euratom treaty, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, but Euratom places no restriction on the export of medical isotopes outside the EU. After leaving Euratom, our ability to access medical isotopes produced in Europe will not be affected.

Since time is pressing, I will say just a little more about safeguards, a subject that hon. Members are rightly concerned about. It is clear that we need continuity; we must avoid any break in our safeguards regime. We currently meet our safeguards standards through our membership of Euratom. The Government's aim is clear: we want to maintain our mutually successful civil nuclear co-operation with Euratom. We can do so while establishing our own nuclear safeguards regime, using the body that already regulates nuclear security and safety: the Office for Nuclear Regulation. In order to do so, we need legislation, which is why the Queen's Speech on 21 June outlined our intention to take powers to set up a domestic nuclear safeguards regime in partnership with the ONR to enable us to meet international standards and nuclear non-proliferation obligations. Regardless of where hon. Members stand on the question of membership, associate membership, transition or departure from Euratom, I hope we can all agree that it is sensible and prudent to take such powers. I do not think anyone could disagree with that.

John Woodcock: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I really cannot, but only because of time; I normally would. Instead, let me say a little about what my Department has been doing to advance the UK's interests.

We are pleased that engagement with the EU is about to begin in earnest. EU directives note that a suitable agreement will need to be reached in relation to the ownership of special fissile materials and safeguards equipment in the UK that are currently Euratom's property—I note the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on that issue. The outcome of such an agreement, like the rest of the UK's future relationship with Euratom, will be subject to negotiations with the EU and Euratom, throughout which our primary aim will be to maintain our mutually successful civil nuclear co-operation with Euratom and the rest of the world. I reiterate that we are strong supporters of Euratom, and that is not going to change. The first phase of negotiations will commence next week, on 17 July, following the publication of the European Commission's position paper on Euratom. Our own position paper will be published imminently.

Albert Owen: Will that be before the recess? Will it be a written statement, or will it come to the House?

Richard Harrington: Imminently means imminently. [Interruption.]

That was quite a good line, actually.

We are ready and confident that we can find common ground as officials enter the first phase of negotiations, because there is a clear mutual interest in maintaining close and effective co-operation.

We are also keen to ensure minimal disruption to civil nuclear trade and co-operation with non-European partners. To that end, we are negotiating with the US, Canada, Australia and Japan so that we have the appropriate co-operation agreements in place. I reinforce that point because hon. Members may have read or heard that everything has to be done in a painfully long sequence that takes years and years. I can tell them not only that it is possible to do these things in parallel, but that we are doing so.

We will avoid the cliff edge feared by the hon. Member for Ynys Môn. We are preparing the domestic Nuclear Safeguards Bill, we are opening negotiations with the EU, we are talking to third countries about bilateral agreements, and we are talking to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Nobody doubts the UK's credentials as a responsible nuclear state, and everyone in the UK and elsewhere is keen to see that continue. The UK has been in the forefront of nuclear non-proliferation for 60 years. I have no doubt that we can bring these discussions to a satisfactory conclusion.

I am sure hon. Members will be quick to remind me that I have not yet mentioned nuclear research and development. I will have to cover this quickly, but I want them to know that it is another strand of work that we are taking seriously and acting on swiftly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 27 June that we would underwrite the UK's share of the EU joint European torus fusion project. We are totally committed to R and D collaboration, in particular to Oxfordshire's world-leading Culham Centre for Fusion Energy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. The Secretary of State described JET in his announcement as a "prized facility". I assure all hon. Members that this is a top priority for us.

There is no question of lack of support for Euratom. There has been discussion today of whether we need to leave it at all. There was clear advice at the time about the unique nature of the legal relationship between the separate treaties and about their inseparability. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was asked by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee whether it would be possible to leave the EU but remain in Euratom. He said:

"Essentially, the interleaving of various aspects of the treaties in practice could have meant that it was defective. The article 50 notification would have been defective had we not served it for Euratom as well. Therefore, we served it, but at the outset we said that we want to have continuity of co-operation and collaboration, and that is what we intend to achieve."

10.58 am

Albert Owen: Thank you for chairing the debate in such a splendid fashion, Mr Gray. I thank each of the 15 Members who participated.

I set out in this debate to create consensus so that we can get the best deal for Britain. The Minister has been slightly helpful, but only slightly. He would have done better to have said that before the recess we would have a debate on the Floor of the House on how we can move this matter forward. We need to hold the Government to account—not with a statement just before recess, but with a proper and open debate like this one, so that we can be constructive and move forward together as one. That is what I set out to do today, and that is what we have done.

The Government's rhetoric needs to turn into action. Demanding that has been the responsibility of Back Benchers in this debate, and it will be the responsibility of the Opposition and the Government, working together, to get the best deal for the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered negotiations on future Euratom membership.

Schools: Nottingham

11 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for Nottingham schools.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. Today's motion is very deliberate; I want to talk about the support that Nottingham schools need, not just the funding they receive. Too often Ministers have talked our city down. We must be frank about the challenges we face in raising educational attainment, especially at key stage 4, but we must also recognise progress, innovation and success. Failing to do so is demoralising and counterproductive.

I hope the Minister will welcome the fact that 83% of children in Nottingham are now taught in good and outstanding schools, up from 61% just three years ago. Some 22% of our schools are now rated outstanding—that is the second highest local authority level in the east midlands, and above the national average. I hope he will also welcome the improvement in key stage 2 results. The progress made by children in Nottingham's primary schools last year matched the national average in reading and outstripped national averages in writing and maths. Children come to those primaries with low levels of school readiness and low speech and communication levels. Many require additional language support and pupil mobility is very high.

Nottingham is rightly proud of its "Maths Mastery" programme, developed in collaboration with the two regional maths hubs. Drawing on learning from Singapore and other leading international practice, Nottingham is developing a maths teaching culture that is already delivering enhanced outcomes, with the approach now being rolled out from the early years through to KS4.

The city's five special schools are all rated good or outstanding, and Oak Field School is recognised internationally as a model of excellence in working with children and young people with profound and multiple disabilities. We also have an outstanding hospital school at the Queen's Medical Centre.

More than 8,000 Nottingham children are learning a musical instrument in school, up an incredible 1,652% in the past 12 years. In 78% of Nottingham primary schools, every child is learning an instrument, compared with a figure of 58% nationally. Some 48% of pupils continue with instrumental teaching after the first year, compared with 27% nationally. There has been a 385% increase in the numbers of pupils gaining a nationally recognised music qualification in the past three years alone.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. She will know my constituent, Sheku Kanneh-Mason, who last year won the BBC young musician of the year contest, as he went to Trinity School, a secondary school in her constituency. He is a great example of the sort of specialism and expertise that young people in our city can achieve. My concern more broadly is that all those specialisms may be sacrificed if the speculated cuts to the funding formula and the changes hit Nottingham schools particularly hard. Can my hon. Friend say a

word about why some of those specialist skills among the teaching staff and beyond are so important in our city?

Lilian Greenwood: Sheku Kanneh-Mason is indeed an acclaimed cellist, and Trinity School and all of us are rightly very proud of him. I will say more about the importance of music and other enrichment activities and why they are under threat.

Students from across the city not only enjoy playing or singing in an ensemble, but are equipping themselves with perseverance, self-belief and a lifelong love of music. It is particularly pleasing to note that Nottingham is in the top quintile for those on pupil premium learning a musical instrument. However, while the Nottingham Music Hub is always exploring new ways to generate income, I am concerned that the local authority and individual schools may find it more difficult to fund the service in the future.

Schools provide other opportunities. The number of children able to swim 25 metres at the end of key stage 2 has more than doubled to 45% in the past four years. Some 6,000 primary and 5,300 secondary students are involved in competitive school games and sports.

I began the debate by saying that I wanted the Minister to recognise that there is much to be proud of in Nottingham schools, but I would be failing my constituents if I did not also acknowledge that we need to do much better in ensuring that every child leaves school with the skills and knowledge they need to lead successful adult lives. Formal qualifications are an important measure, but they are not the only one. I hope the Minister will recognise that good schools also ensure that students are resilient, kind, reflective, motivated, confident, and have respect for themselves and others. Character development is vital and should be valued.

Many Nottingham families live in poverty and some have low aspirations. Too many live in inadequate or overcrowded housing and have very low incomes and poor health, both mental and physical. Some children face additional challenges because English is not their first language, and we know that white working-class children, especially boys, are often the hardest to reach. Even where children are making good progress at primary school and are achieving at the end of year 6, that is too often not maintained to GCSE level. We clearly need to improve the transition from primary to secondary education, but there is concern that the Government's emphasis on a limited range of academic subjects up to age 16 is off-putting to those pupils, including the academically able, who would be enthused by a more vocational route. That view is expressed not only by teachers and heads, but by the former Conservative Education Secretary, Lord Baker, who has championed high-quality technical education for more than two decades.

Nottingham is working hard to provide sufficient primary school places by expanding existing good schools. We know that the bulge in pupil numbers will mean a shortfall in secondary school places if action is not taken now. A reliance on the emergence of new free schools is not enough. Nottingham needs extra capital resources to expand existing schools or to open new ones. The high level of in-year admissions is a further challenge, particularly for our maintained schools. The current system is not transparent and there is concern

that some academies are reluctant to admit pupils with additional needs, placing some of the most vulnerable children at risk of missing time in school. The White Paper, “Educational Excellence Everywhere”, called for local authorities to have a co-ordinating role in dealing with such admissions. Will the Minister say whether he will be returning to that proposal?

A further concern is the high level of permanent exclusions at key stages 3 and 4. Last year, 108 city children were permanently excluded, and this year the number is set to be even higher. It is deeply concerning that a high proportion of those students have special educational needs. The pupil referral unit now has more than 300 students on its books, and those young people are placed with a number of alternative providers across the city, but the cost is very high and outcomes are poor. Funding for such provision falls on the local authority and diverts resources away from other high-needs children. What action will the Government take to incentivise schools to tackle poor behaviour, rather than using exclusion too widely to shift responsibility?

As the Minister is well aware, school funding—already a hot topic—rightly became the focus of debate during the general election. I have listened carefully to the Minister’s responses since then, and I do not believe he has adequately addressed my voters’ concerns. He says that the schools budget has been protected in real terms since 2010, but he knows that pupil numbers are rising. The cake may be bigger, but it has to be shared between more people. Will he come clean and admit that the increase in the budget has not been sufficient to protect per pupil funding in real terms? He knows that all schools face higher national insurance contributions, pension contributions, unfunded national pay rises and now the apprenticeship levy.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that spending per pupil would fall in real terms by 8% and the National Audit Office confirmed that,

“funding per pupil will, on average, rise only from £5,447 in 2015-16 to £5,519 in 2019-20, a real-terms reduction once inflation is taken into account.”

The Minister says he will support schools to offset these pressures, but I can find little evidence of such support in delivering the savings required. One head at a primary academy told me:

“We have already renegotiated every single contract both as one school and as part of a Multi-Academy Trust. We have lost and not replaced three teaching assistants, a sports coach, a music teacher and an art teacher. Our pupils walk to their Swimming lessons for 12 sessions rather than travelling by bus for 36. If a teacher is ill, we don’t use qualified teachers to stand in front of classes until day four of their absence because insurance for teacher absence that starts after the third day is considerably cheaper than insurance that starts on the first day.”

It really is that bleak. Schools in Nottingham are making cuts that have a direct and damaging impact on the quality of education.

The head of an outstanding primary school told me that they had cut the number of teaching assistants, teachers and learning mentors, increasing pressure on remaining staff and providing less support for children with additional needs. As he said:

“All of this is also taking place within the context of an increase in the numbers of families who need extra support, due to benefit changes, higher levels of domestic violence, more families being evicted...and the rise of the number of families seeking support from food banks.”

Secondary schools paint a similar picture: fewer teachers, larger classes, less subject choice, and cuts to after-school activities.

I note that the Minister has sometimes resorted to blaming his Government’s choices on the budget deficit in 2010. That is simply not good enough. His party has been in power for seven years. They promised that as a result of their austerity plans, the deficit would be eliminated by 2015. Any shred of economic credibility is long gone and their decision to spend £1 billion on buying a parliamentary majority underlines that point.

A head told me what inadequate funding means to his school: “Am I able to replace the 18 failing interactive whiteboards in our classrooms? No. Am I able to purchase library books to inspire a love for reading in the next generation? No. Can the disabled child’s carer have overtime to accompany her for a full day’s educational visit? Of course, yes. As a result of that carer’s overtime, can the five-year-olds have another set of glue sticks for the summer term? No.” He said:

“As the Headteacher I am not bemoaning the lack of capacity for investing in education at a level that will make a significant difference to the life chances of my pupils; I am genuinely struggling to see how I can squeeze basic school provisions out of the funding available.”

On top of the existing level of real terms cuts we also face the prospect of a new national funding formula that will take money away from every single school in my constituency. I welcome the Minister’s promise that, “there will be no cut in per pupil funding as a consequence of moving to the national fair funding formula”,

but, as he knows, protecting a budget in cash terms is no protection at all. With rising inflation and increasing demands—for example, the introduction of much needed mental health support—school leaders simply feel unable to deliver what is asked of them. I could fill hours with the testimony of dedicated school staff who feel that the Government are not giving them the support they need. Adequate funding, especially for schools serving areas of high deprivation, is essential. Schools cannot keep doing more with less. They are at breaking point.

I hope the Minister will not simply dismiss my concerns and those of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), who will speak shortly. I want the Minister to commit to, at the very least, maintaining school funding in real terms for Nottingham schools. If he cannot, I will not stop asking. I also want him to come and see why I am asking.

Last Friday I visited the city schools exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary. The gallery’s head of learning told me,

“what we are hearing from teachers again and again is that coming to a gallery, working with artists, really helps their children think differently, think creatively, question, be critical and reflective...particularly it builds confidence in those children who are told too often they are wrong, to keep quiet and not question. The gallery offers those children a place to thrive.”

While I was there, students from Southwold Primary enjoyed telling me about their work. Southwold is a good school, but it serves one of the most disadvantaged parts of my constituency: 46.1% of pupils have English as an additional language and 47.6% are eligible for free school meals. I have seen for myself the creative ways in which the school works to give their children a great start in life.

[Lilian Greenwood]

The head said,

“we are giving our city children the experiences that more affluent counterparts can afford. Our pupils find it hard to make connections due to limited experiences and we need to provide these experiences so they can better access the curriculum and understand contexts for learning.”

She explained that in last year’s SATs reading test, one text was about a safari park; some children did not know what a safari park was, let alone visited one. As she says:

“All this needs funding and at the moment we are trying to do it on a shoestring.”

Nottingham’s schools need our support. They need the resources to do their vital job of investing in the next generation. I hope the Minister will come and see our schools for himself and commit to supporting them, enabling every Nottingham child to thrive.

James Gray (in the Chair): Unusually, and for good constituency reasons, I call the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for no more than four or five minutes.

11.15 am

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I will start by declaring an interest as chair of governors at Rosslyn Park Primary School. I shall not impose on the Minister’s time for more than four or five minutes; I am enormously grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to speak. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing the debate. She, like me, made school cuts the focus of her terrific re-election campaign, and she and I vowed to use all the devices of this place to raise the issue loudly and assertively. We have both spent a lot of time meeting parents at school gates; it is impossible to overstate the strength of feeling on this topic.

Getting a good start in life in order to thrive should be something we aspire to for every child. Regrettably, in my constituency too often that is not the case. That is both the cause of and caused by cyclical poverty in my community. That was the theme of my maiden speech, and it will be the golden thread running through all my work in this place. It is critical that our schools are sufficiently supported to make sure we can close the gap, or too many of our children will start behind and simply never catch up. That is a shame. It is not a fact of life and people rightly look to this place and to the Government in the expectation that there will be action to tackle it. It explains the dismay at the idea that schools in Nottingham might receive real terms budget cuts. Left wing or right wing, whatever their politics, people do not see that as a sensible idea. It is a false economy for the state and will lead to greater dependence in the future. None of us will win. I can understand that there may be historic inequities that need to be ironed out, but I urge Ministers to think creatively and to level up, or they will take from those with the least in order to give it often to those with the least need. I defy anybody to join me at the school gates in Bilborough and explain that to parents.

School improvement is an imprecise art. As I declared, I am the chair of governors at one of Nottingham’s biggest primary schools. We have been on a journey

with Ofsted and have got to the point where we are very excited and cannot wait for Ofsted to come and see how well we are doing. Our results last week put us virtually at the national average for attainment and above that for progress. In future years I have no doubt we will go even further. That is all built on current levels of investment and on having outstanding leadership that works outside the classroom, meaning that each leader can make half a dozen or more staff better, leading to better teaching on a daily basis in each class. It means never needing supply and always delivering quality, but that is at risk from real-terms school cuts—nearly £2 million-worth across the constituency.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South mentioned, there are only so many physical budgets that the cuts can come from. In the end, they will come from staff. The public will watch us discuss cuts and talk about real terms and cash terms. That is a political argument for now, but it will mean naught in future. When P45s go out to teachers and teaching assistants, that is what parents will understand and they will not see that as a good thing. It is not helpful for Nottingham and we ask Ministers to revisit those plans and come up with something that works.

11.18 am

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) on securing this important debate, and I congratulate her and the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on their contributions to it. I acknowledge the successes in school improvement in Nottingham that the hon. Lady highlighted. If we look at the data, we see that there have clearly been improvements in phonics results, EBacc results and in key stage 2 results.

The Government want to ensure that every pupil receives a world-class education, regardless of their background or where they live. We have made significant progress. England outperformed the rest of the United Kingdom in the OECD’s most recent PISA science assessments. The attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their more affluent peers has shrunk by 7% at key stage 4 and by 9.3% at key stage 2 since 2011. There are now 1.8 million more children in schools that are rated good or outstanding than there were in 2010. In Nottingham, that translates into nearly 8,000 more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010.

However, the pace of improvement in some parts of the country, including Nottingham, is still not good enough. Only 80% of schools in Nottingham are rated as good or outstanding, compared with the national position of 89%. There is still underperformance in some schools in Nottingham compared with the rest of the country.

For example, in 2016, 75% of Nottingham’s pupils reached the expected standard in phonics, compared with 81% nationally and 87% in Newham—one of the most deprived parts of the country—but I am pleased that the phonics results in Nottingham have increased year on year, with 48% passing that check in 2012. In Nottingham, 50% of primary school children in key stage 2 achieved the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics, compared with 53% nationally and 62% in Newham. At key stage 4, 16.8% of secondary

school pupils in Nottingham achieved the EBacc combination of GCSEs, compared with 24.7% nationally and 31% in Newham.

I remain as concerned about school standards in Nottingham as I was when I met the directors of education for Nottingham City Council and the regional schools commissioner in November 2015 to discuss how they intended to raise standards. Our ambition is for a school system that prevents underperformance, helps all schools to improve and extends the reach of high-performing schools and headteachers. That is the key to delivering more high-quality school places across the country and accelerating the pace of improvements throughout the country, including in Nottingham.

To succeed in that, we have targeted investment in the school system to support those schools most in need, and to support the development of teachers and school leaders, particularly in the most challenging parts of the country. For example, we have established a new fund, the strategic school improvement fund, which provides £280 million over two years to target resources at those schools most in need of support. That will help those schools that are struggling to improve to drive up standards and improve pupil attainment. Working at a local level, key partners will bring together local intelligence to help inform applications and ensure that funds are directed at identified improvement priorities that meet local needs.

Working with schools at a local level is also an important part of our strategy to deliver more good and outstanding school places. Our eight regional schools commissioners are pivotal to driving up standards locally, brokering schools into strong multi-academy trusts, and challenging and supporting those trusts to raise standards where they are not performing effectively.

Multi-academy trusts play a key role in harnessing the support of our system leaders and are helping to turn around some of the more challenging schools right across the country. Bluecoat Beechdale Academy, which serves a deprived community in the Bilborough part of Nottingham, was judged good by Ofsted in February this year. Ofsted noted that pupil progress is now improving rapidly. Djanogly Strelley Academy in Nottingham was also judged good by Ofsted in February this year, which is a significant turnaround from 2013, when its predecessor school was judged inadequate.

When we are not satisfied that the progress an academy is making is good enough, we will take decisive action, including re-brokering it to a new sponsor.

Lilian Greenwood: One of the things that causes me great concern is the time that it can take to re-broker a school and the difficulties that then creates when a new academy comes into place. That was certainly the experience at Victoria Primary School. It has now been re-brokered, and I am very supportive of the headteacher and the multi-academy trust, but the truth is that for a long time—I discussed this with the previous regional schools commissioner—that school was left without good leadership. That is not good enough. I know that in some cases there is a struggle to find academy chains to take on schools in order for them to make that sort of progress.

Nick Gibb: I share the hon. Lady's impatience. We need to find more good school sponsors to take on underperforming schools. It is an iterative process; we

are seeing more and more academy chains being formed and more stand-alone academies taking on underperforming schools and helping them to improve. For example, Riverside Primary School in Nottingham was not performing well. In 2016, it was transferred to the NOVA academy trust, which is a strong sponsor operating in the city. We need more strong sponsors in Nottingham and throughout the country to drive up standards. We are seeing that the system of using leaders in the education system—a school-led system—is driving up standards. It has resulted in 1.8 million more pupils in good and outstanding schools than there were seven years ago.

The local examples I have cited demonstrate that the combined effects of targeted funding to the system to drive school improvement and action taken at a local level are continuing to deliver more good and outstanding places for children. However, underpinning all the support we are putting in to the system to help drive school improvement is the need to ensure that we have fair distribution of funding to schools, which properly reflects need.

I listened to the contributions from the hon. Members for Nottingham South and for Nottingham North, as well as the intervention from the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), on school funding. I have spent a lot of time in the past few months, during the election and during the extensive consultation, meeting schoolteachers, parents and governors from across the country. From those conversations, I have never been more convinced that our current funding system is broken.

The data that we use to allocate funding to local authorities are more than a decade out of date. For example, over that period the free school meals rate has almost halved in Southwark and more than doubled in Dorset, but the funding each local authority receives has not responded to that change. It is not right that local authorities with similar needs and characteristics receive very different levels of funding from central Government. That unfairness is exacerbated at individual school level, because local authorities make very different decisions in designing their local formulae. For example, a school in Barnsley would have 50% more funding if there were no other change to its circumstances but that it was situated in Hackney instead. The system by which we distribute money to schools is unfair and anachronistic.

That is why the Government have gone further than previous Governments in reforming school funding. Our manifesto committed to making funding fairer and we will do that by introducing a single national funding formula, so that all schools in England are funded on a consistent and transparent basis that properly reflects needs. In March 2016 we launched our first stage of consultation on the formula. We asked for views on the principles that should underpin it and its overall design. The principles included using robust data to ensure that funding is matched to pupil characteristics, such as deprivation, and the importance of transparency in the formula. More than 6,000 people responded and there was widespread support for our proposals.

In December last year we launched the second stage of our consultation on the detailed design of the formula. As part of that consultation, and to ensure maximum transparency, we published detailed illustrative impact data for all schools and local authorities, which enabled us to hold a truly national debate for more than three

[*Nick Gibb*]

months. The Government response will address all the issues and concerns raised throughout the consultation and by hon. Members in debates such as this—we have had several over the past few weeks and months. We will respond to the consultation in due course.

Not only do we want the system for distribution to be fair; we also want to ensure that every school has the resources it needs to deliver a world-class education for every child. In order to achieve that, we have protected the schools budget in real terms since 2010, and the Government have committed to increase the school budget further, as well as to continue to protect the pupil premium to support those who need it. The Queen's Speech was clear that the Government are determined to introduce a fairer distribution of funding for schools. We will set out our plans shortly and, as outlined in our manifesto,

"we will make sure that no school has its budget cut as a result of the new formula."

We know that how schools use their money is also important in delivering the best outcomes for pupils, so we will continue to provide support to help them use their funding cost-effectively. The Government have produced tools, information and guidance to support improved financial health and efficiency in schools, which is available in one collection on the gov.uk website.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister confirm whether he is saying that no school will lose, in real terms, per-pupil funding? That is a really important point. Protection of cash is not a protection given the current level of inflation and the cost pressures. Will he protect per-pupil funding for schools in Nottingham?

Nick Gibb: What I have said is that no school will lose per-pupil funding under that new national funding formula. The issue is that once the money has been allocated to the local authority, what the local formula can do—as advised by the school forum—is to redistribute that money in a different way. What I can say is that the commitment in our manifesto was that no school will lose money as a consequence of moving to a national funding formula.

I conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Nottingham South on securing this important debate. Accelerating the pace of school improvement across the country is a shared priority and we are committed to ensuring that, regardless of where they live, all young people have equal access to a high-quality education. Targeted support at a local level, as I have outlined, will help us to deliver that, and a national funding formula also underpins it. For the first time we would have a clear, simple and transparent system that matches funding to children's needs and the schools they attend. It will enable all schools to provide a high-quality, knowledge-rich education for their pupils.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

New Towns

[*MR ADRIAN BAILEY in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered challenges facing new towns.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Bailey, and to see so many colleagues from across the House here to discuss this incredibly important issue. At a time when the Government are embarking on an ambitious house building programme, it is particularly important that we consider the experiences of new towns—the successes and, in some cases, the challenges and the things that have gone less well in their history. New towns are an experiment that should inform housing policy in this country. There is much that we can learn from our different experiences in our constituencies. Although there are many issues that we share concerns about, we also have common successes that we can bring to the House.

This is a wonderful opportunity to get colleagues to think about working together collaboratively on this issue. We often hear about our coastal town colleagues, who band together successfully, our rural colleagues, who also band together successfully to lobby for some of the things they want, and our urban colleagues, but there is something very distinctive about a new town. Very often we are by nature isolated within a rural environment. New towns were created outside cities as part of a vision for fresh, clean air and to tackle overcrowding. That isolation means that we are not always welcomed by the rural communities that surround us.

Connectivity and transport issues sometimes create urban isolation both within the new town and in connection with the rest of the country. We certainly have that issue in Telford: we are isolated in many ways. People sometimes say, "Where is your constituency? Is it somewhere on the way to Wales?" No, it is not. It is a vibrant, thriving new town set in the heart of rural Shropshire, not too far from Birmingham and now easily connectible to London. I want people to think about the ways our new towns interact with the hubs across the country.

Many new towns are marking their anniversaries. Harlow celebrated 70 years this year, and Milton Keynes has had its 50th anniversary.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. This year Crawley celebrates the 70th anniversary of its designation as a new town, and it has certainly been a very successful community. One of its problems, which she touched on and no doubt will expound further, is that it was designed for about half its current population, so we must address issues such as access to health services, parking and housing as we go forward for the next 70 years.

Lucy Allan: I thank my hon. Friend for that very helpful intervention. He is absolutely right that our respective constituencies share many features.

One of the other reasons for calling this debate is that I want new towns to be recognised as distinctive areas with specific needs.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I represent about two thirds of Cwmbran new town, in the southern part of my constituency. Unfortunately, the Government are proposing to relocate jobs away from the Cwmbran pension centre and out of the new town. Although we can certainly have policies in favour of new towns, I suggest that the Government need a coherent approach and should not be withdrawing jobs from new towns at the same time.

Lucy Allan: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution. I completely agree that a successful new town must have inward investment and jobs. It is about not just housing, but the whole community. We must look at new towns from that perspective.

Some years ago the Communities and Local Government Committee did some excellent work on new towns. It first looked at them in 2002, and it revisited them in the 2007-08 Session, but the Government of the day were reluctant to take on board its recommendations. The Committee visited Harlow, Corby and Telford, and did a significant amount of research. Disappointingly, there was the sense that new towns should be normalised and treated just like any other town. There was no recognition of their distinctive and specific needs, which is partly why I wanted to hold this debate.

Fortunately, the Town and Country Planning Association revisited those reports and produced some excellent work on how to use the experiences of the past to inform what we do for the future. It set up the new towns network to work with local authorities in new towns across the country and try to bring together some of these common themes. I only discovered that wonderful organisation while researching for this debate, which was fortunate, because had I come to this place without that knowledge, I would probably have been reinventing the wheel. I am grateful to it for its excellent publications, which I will happily send to any hon. Member who would like to see them. They contain a thorough analysis of the challenges. I am delighted to see that the Minister has a copy of one of them with him, and I hope that he has read it.

I have the great honour and privilege of representing the fastest growing new town in the country. Telford is a unique town. It has a specific identity and a proud industrial heritage as the birthplace of the industrial revolution. It is a collection of former mining villages on the east Shropshire coalfield. It has an enviable rural-urban mix and a fantastic quality of life, which we should seek to emulate in the house building drive that the Government are committed to. Despite the many hurdles that Telford has experienced along the way, and rural Shropshire's considerable resistance to its development—for example, there was resistance to the building of the M54, the main link road to Birmingham, and it took many years of persistence to get that connection—it is now a dynamic, thriving centre of gravity for the entire surrounding area. Some of that was brought about by welcome Government investment in Telford. We should not ignore the part that the Government have played in their commitment to Telford, for which I am very grateful. I very much hope that, as the MP for Telford, I will be able to continue to secure such investment.

Telford is now a huge population centre and a huge business centre. It has inward investment, commerce and advanced manufacturing, and all sorts of high-tech

and new economy businesses are coming to Telford, but it has never had it easy. Its success is all about its innovation and willingness to embrace change. All new towns have had to have exactly that spirit: they have had to have determination, optimism and hope to make the towns what they are today. The new town movement was conceived with the vision of hope, opportunity for all, clean air, green spaces and better living conditions, but in some cases that vision did not come to full fruition.

Telford has overcome those obstacles and is a shining example of what a successful new town can be. That is why I wanted to share its example today. It is now where all the houses are planned and all the jobs are going, so it needs to be where the schools and hospitals are built and where the infrastructure is located. I say that because we still have many battles with the surrounding rural Shropshire about what investment should come to Telford.

As I said, all new towns were based on a premise of optimism and a vision for a better future. The lessons we can learn from the past will play a fundamental part in tackling this country's housing shortage.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who is generous in giving way to me again. I entirely agree about the vision for new towns. When they were conceived by the post-war Labour Government in the late 1940s, it was not only with a vision of hope and optimism, but with the idea that things could be planned in advance, rather than only as a response to past problems. The new towns were settlements where we could plan for the future. That could be used again as a strategy for future new towns.

Lucy Allan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that important point. The long-term stewardship of the assets of new towns is fundamental to their future success. It is all too easy to say, "We have a local authority that is thinking only about the needs of today and is neglecting to look at the long-term vision." We want the stewardship concept.

Henry Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her generosity and forbearance in giving way to me a second time. Yes, it was under a Labour Government that new towns were created, but it was also under a Labour Government that, sadly, Crawley lost its hospital's maternity and accident and emergency services in 2001 and 2005. It is therefore pertinent that we concentrate on the importance of long-term, sustainable planning.

Lucy Allan: I entirely agree.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on the importance of health services in future plans for any new town. In Redditch we have seen the unfortunate removal of A&E and children's A&E services from the Alexandra Hospital—a temporary closure has now become permanent—and they have moved to Worcester. I will not go into the details, but they highlight the need to plan holistically for health services, and that is in addition to all the other issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) is discussing.

Lucy Allan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. In Telford we, too, have had some debate about the future of our health services. I am

[*Lucy Allan*]

delighted to report that we will not lose the A&E or the women and children's unit, as was widely touted during the election campaign. One reason is that Telford has a rapidly growing population, so the need is self-evident. However, she makes an important point.

I have talked about some of the positives and good lessons that we can learn from new towns, but this debate is about the challenges, so I will move on quickly. Colleagues will face many of the same challenges in their constituencies, such as the new build challenges. New build brings its own huge range of different complications and problems experienced by residents, including pressure on infrastructure, school places, doctors' waiting lists and little things such as postcodes or polling stations, which we do not have in new build areas, as well as street names and bus stops. Those are some of the things that are so important to quality of life.

People move to a new town because they are buying the dream—they are buying their own home, their future and their children's future—but some of them will end up living in part-finished estates, paying exorbitant fees to management companies that do not discharge their obligations—that is probably a matter for another day, as we cannot address it in detail in this debate, but I wish to revisit it on another occasion.

Another common challenge we face is transport connectivity. Infrastructure investment often lags behind population growth. In addition, many new towns are designed around the car, but in Telford we have low car ownership and poor public transport, because of the low density of population. Low density is a good thing and part of what new towns are all about, but there are knock-on consequences for everyday life. As for digital connectivity, I will not talk much about it because only yesterday in the main Chamber we had a very full discussion about digital shortcomings with regard to broadband. People spoke at great length about new build and deficiencies in broadband.

Low-density population also makes bus routes unprofitable, which is a difficult problem to address. Road layouts even make walking difficult and—perhaps other Members share this view—we have many roundabouts bristling with traffic lights, which hold up traffic flow completely unnecessarily. That will definitely be the subject of another debate, such is the volume of constituency letters I receive on the subject, and the frustration it causes many people in Telford.

Some hon. Members present will share some of those concerns, but all new towns share the major challenge of a maturing new town, which is renewal and regeneration. As our new towns come of age, whether they are 50 or 70, we have to look at how we deal with fading infrastructure and faded housing estates that are sometimes not fit for occupation. As has already been mentioned, the failure to plan for the long term has caused some of those difficulties.

We all have decaying housing estates in our constituencies, built 50 years ago with poor design and poor materials. Whole estates are now in need of renewal, because they have been left behind. Every time I go to one of those estates, I ask where they will be in 10 years' time, never mind 50 years' time, and where the plan is to make the homes fit for the next generation. Such homes are often part of the private rented sector, so I feel that no one is

looking after them—the council will often wash its hands of the responsibility. Yes, selective licensing might be introduced to try to make the landlords responsible, but the issue is much bigger than that, because often whole estates are in need of renewal and regeneration.

Infrastructure, too, from local centres to bridges that have outlived their intended lifespan, affects the perception of what was once an ambitious and modern project, but which is now looking faded and tired. That can affect the whole ambience of a town. An essential part of the success of a new town is not only to keep replacing the old, but the need for a vision and that concept of long-term stewardship, as we have discussed.

I am delighted that last week the Department for Communities and Local Government announced a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund as part of the Government's commitment to their ambitious house building programme. It is very welcome. Telford has 17,000 new homes planned for the next 14 years, and I very much hope that it will be able to take advantage of the infrastructure fund. When the Minister responds to the debate, will he give us some steer as to whether new towns will be able to make bids to that fund in order to solve some of the problems of renewal and regeneration?

Will the Minister also recognise the fact that new towns are special? They have specific qualities and challenges. A cross-departmental approach is needed to support them. We are talking about housing, transport, business and the digital economy, so I would like to see Departments across Government focusing on the issue as a whole. We want to see the investment that we have had in Telford replicated in other new towns, which have not always benefited to the extent that we have done. Some challenges are specific to new towns, but previously Governments have wanted to normalise new towns, as if they were just like any other town. That was a mistake, so I reiterate how distinctive and special they are. Colleagues in all parts of the Chamber will agree with that.

In such a short debate we can barely scratch the surface of these issues. I would very much like to set up an all-party parliamentary group to take forward this initiative—I will definitely be knocking on the doors of those Members who are present. There are 32 new towns throughout the UK, and I will talk to the representatives of all of them to ask whether they wish to be part of an APPG.

We need to challenge the stereotype of new towns. Too often they are seen as substandard, but they are not; they are fantastically inspiring places to live, work and raise families. I could not recommend Telford more highly to anyone who wants to live the dream. Yes, there are problems and things that need to be ironed out, but Telford is definitely the place to do that. In fact, we have been very lucky; the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has been to Telford on many occasions, and I think he fully understands the issues I have raised today. I am grateful to him for his support.

Telford is special. In 2018 we will mark our 50th anniversary. Although there may be lots of events and celebrations, we must not lose sight of the need for a vision for the next 50 years. The Government may be able to help local authorities with that. The nature of the election cycle means that local authorities are not always preoccupied in the way they ought to be with long-term thinking about infrastructure needs. I want

to hear from the Minister that there is cross-departmental recognition of the specific needs of new towns, that new towns can access the housing infrastructure fund, and that they will receive help to plan ahead for future challenges.

I make a final plea. We have had a housing White Paper and there is a New Towns Act, but that was passed in 1981, so there may be scope to modernise it and make it fit for purpose for the present day. The key point that I would like everyone to take away is the need for long-term stewardship to secure the future of our fantastic towns, which we are all privileged to represent.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Seven Back Benchers have indicated that they wish to speak. I hope to get everyone in. As a rough guideline, if Back Benchers confine their remarks to about five minutes, that will help me achieve that.

2.51 pm

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing the debate. Building new towns was a good idea—it was a necessity of the time, in both economic and population terms—but they failed to deliver their promise, which leaves my constituents in despair even today. We need to find a way to deliver that promise in a manner that befits the 21st century.

The new town of Skelmersdale was designated in 1961, with a target population of 80,000. Some 60 years on, it has a population of almost half that and little or no local facilities, amenities, transport links or adequate housing. It is a town built around the car, where people are driven underground and forced to use underpasses. The roads mostly have no pavements, but cars move about freely. It is a town famous for its roundabouts, like that mentioned by the hon. Lady.

Skelmersdale residents are proud of their town and work hard to put the best of themselves in the shop window. Only last year, local football coach Carl Eaton was nominated for a BBC sports personality award for his work with Skem Men-Aces, a football team that he founded for people with learning disabilities. The club has won countless trophies, and some of its players represent us at international level. There are many such impressive stories, and they are all the more impressive given that the town is deprived of an adequate town centre, a railway station, sports facilities, education opportunities and so much more. We have a shopping centre that pretends to be the town centre, but it is just a building. When the local council attempted to build a genuine town centre and a modern high street, the owners of the Concourse took out High Court injunctions and made appeals to block it. Skelmersdale is a town failed by narrow commercial interests. People are forced to spend their money elsewhere.

Although Skelmersdale became a designated new town in 1961 and a bright new future was projected, its tracks were pulled up and its train line was shut two years later. It is a town failed by a lack of foresight and that is desperately fighting to get a railway station. It is a town that has low car ownership—I concur with the hon. Lady on that point—but promises are still being broken. The Secretary of State for Transport visited

during the general election campaign and told my constituents that bringing back the Burscough curves would be a quick win. I am still waiting for that announcement. Skelmersdale is so poorly served by bus services that, were it not for a planned rescue by the county council, an area of Ashurst would be without any bus service whatsoever.

All those things absolutely impact on the town's economic prospects. It is a town where, rather than fixing the roof of a local sports centre, which was well used and generated an income, the council shut it down and it eventually burned down. It is a town failed by the council. The promised local hospital never materialised, and even education did not fare well—one high school was forced to close and its students had to relocate elsewhere in the borough. The recently built college withdrew its offer of A-level studies, forcing any student with an aspiration to progress at that level or further to study outside the town. That is an obvious difficulty considering what I said about rail connectivity and the lack of buses. It is a town failed by the education authorities. What can I say about housing? After 60 years, thousands of people still live in what was referred to as “temporary” housing. The planned development of 20,000 houses still has not happened. It is a town failed by planning authorities and developers.

I have fought really hard for Skelmersdale, which I have represented for the past 12 years, and I share local residents' frustration. We still have not seen improvements and investments that were promised more than half a century ago. All the infrastructure has decayed at the same time and needs massive investment, of which we see little or nothing.

Before we move forward and build new towns and villages, we must ensure that we leave no one behind and we must invest in the towns that we have. We must keep our promises—promises that were made a long time ago—to people, update these towns and make them fit for the 21st century. We must help people like my constituents, who moved to our older new towns based on promises that they were given that even today we have not fulfilled. Yes, we need more new build housing, but as we look forward, we must ensure that we do not leave people like my constituents behind. If there is no future for them, what future can we tell other people that they will have in their new towns?

2.57 pm

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I add my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this important debate. She hit many nails on the head, particularly about the need for the Government to work on a cross-departmental basis and have a long-term strategy for new towns over the next few decades.

I should put the record straight: Milton Keynes is actually a new city, not a new town. As my hon. Friend correctly said, we celebrated our 50th birthday earlier this year. I should also say for the record that Milton Keynes has more than 900 roundabouts, which I think is more than anywhere else in the country.

Lucy Allan: Does my hon. Friend have bristling traffic lights all over his roundabouts, or are they left unfettered to let the traffic flow?

Iain Stewart: We have a mixture. Most do not have traffic lights, but a few in the centre do.

As it turns 50, Milton Keynes is at a crossroads for future development. We have reached the size envisaged when Milton Keynes was designated as a new city in the 1960s in terms of both our physical footprint and our planned population of around a quarter of a million. The issue is not whether Milton Keynes should grow at all—there is consensus that it will continue to grow—but in what way, in what direction and over what timescale it will do so.

In 2013, the council passed a core strategy that provided for more than 20,000 new homes over the following decade and a half, and we are currently meeting our five-year land and housing supply target. The difficulty is that while that core strategy bought us time—it more than meets our need for the next period—it did not set a long-term vision for the future of Milton Keynes.

After the 2015 election, I successfully argued that Milton Keynes should have that long-term future strategy. I was delighted when Milton Keynes Council took up the idea and set up a futures group, ably chaired by Sir Peter Gregson, the vice-chancellor of Cranfield University. That painted a positive, dynamic vision for the next few decades of what Milton Keynes should be, looking at having, for example, not just a standard university but one focused on the STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—that our economy needs, loosely based on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology model in the States. The plan was originally called MKIT, but it has morphed into Milton Keynes University. That would help not just to generate economic needs but to provide the social community buzz that a place needs to thrive.

We are looking at growth not just in ourselves but as part of the wider Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor that the National Infrastructure Commission is developing. We had the interim report a few months ago and should have the final report by the time of the autumn Budget. That is critical in looking at not just the area's housing needs but the whole economic construct, from hard infrastructure such as the east-west railway line and the Oxford to Cambridge expressway to 5G broadband provision and all the critical infrastructure needed to support growth.

My concern is that Milton Keynes Council is now pushing ahead with what is called “Plan:MK”, its vision for the next stage of Milton Keynes's future development. That is not in itself a problem, but my real worry is the timing. The consultation document recently put out explicitly rejected that the council could have waited until the infrastructure commission reported and until the futures commission projects were more developed. The council thinks that would result in an unacceptable delay, but I fundamentally disagree. We have the time now to pause—not to pause house building, because the core strategy provides for our needs at the immediate time—and to look ahead at the smart cities technology and all the other developments that could usefully shape vibrant new communities that are not just urban sprawl.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Telford said, neighbouring counties are fearful of ever-expansion. However, they have their needs too, and by doing this in the right way, planning small villages that are smartly connected, we could create new communities that

people want, not the urban sprawl that people fear. My plea to central Government is to help give us the space to develop that long-term strategy, which will be one of the major providers of the housing supply and economic growth that the country desperately needs. We have a homeless problem in Milton Keynes and we want to build new houses, but let us do that in a properly planned way. We also need to think about the delivery mechanism. A metro-style devolution arrangement will not work in the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, but perhaps we should look at reconvening the old Milton Keynes Development Corporation, which could be jointly owned by the authorities along that route, as an effective delivery mechanism.

Our city motto is:

“By knowledge, design and understanding.”

We could get a vibrant, new expansion for Milton Keynes and the surrounding areas. That is my plea and my hope. I support my hon. Friend's plan to create an all-party group to help look at our shared interest and I very much look forward to being part of that.

3.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I, too, am grateful to the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing the debate, which provides a genuinely interesting opportunity to think not only about our own new towns, but about the problems faced by new towns holistically. Like her, I hope that this is the start of the conversation rather than the end.

Aside from the cult film “Gregory's Girl”, the new town I represent was probably most famous for a simple but effective advertising slogan from the 1980s. If I were to ask, “What's it called?”—

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Cumbernauld!

Stuart C. McDonald: Exactly—it is Cumbernauld. I even had a student activist at one point suggest “Who's he called? Stuart McDonald” as a possible campaign slogan, but thankfully that was ruled out of hand. That was testament at least to the fact that that slogan had imprinted itself into public consciousness so much that someone born after it was created was still very much aware of it.

The new towns were an incredible achievement in planning and building, born of an urgent need for housing after war and a baby boom, and Cumbernauld is no exception to that. Though it was designed as part of Robert Matthew's Clyde valley regional plan to move population out of Glasgow, it has a slightly different history, being the only one of the mark 1 new towns designated during the period of the Conservative Government of the 1950s. One consequence of that is that it has a slightly different design plan. Unlike other new towns, it does not share the concept of different neighbourhoods but aimed instead for a higher density design with a single town centre accessible by foot from all other parts of the town.

In many ways, Cumbernauld remains a great place to live. It has the same sense of civic pride that other hon. Members have described as present in their new towns. It is also an extraordinarily green town, with an amazing percentage of the town's area comprising woods and

parks. It enjoys a wonderful range of local organisations and community groups, with many taking a great interest in preserving that green space and maintaining it for all to enjoy.

However, as others have said, new towns face significant challenges as well. I could mention transport and one or two others, but in the time left I will focus on two or three at most. As has already been said, all new towns will face a huge challenge because a massive part of their housing stock and infrastructure will be exactly the same age, therefore requiring significant sums of investment in renewal over a short period of time. Some of those problems of regeneration and renewal are made even more challenging by the way in which stock was transferred first from development corporation to council, and then from council to private owners. Therefore, in some parts of Cumbernauld, it is almost impossible to get agreement between all the different owners of flats in order to take action to regenerate, which is required by the title deeds.

Another challenge is jobs. I will not go on about that for too long, but one of the key challenges we face is the possible loss of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs office in Cumbernauld—I think my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) will have something to say about that as well—which we will return to in the months ahead.

If I were to survey my constituents, I think the No. 1 new town issue they would highlight would be the town centre. It is built over the dual carriageway that goes through the town and, because the bus station is also located in the structure, for many that will be their one and only recollection of Cumbernauld. It was envisaged as a solitary megastructure designed to accommodate all the retail, municipal and leisure needs of the whole population of 50,000. Originally, it also included penthouse executive apartments. At first, it was remarkable. On completion, I think it was Britain's first indoor shopping mall, but I do not think my constituents would disagree when I say it has not stood the test of time well; in fact, it has dated badly. The building's concrete structure makes its exterior appear unattractive, and it has been a challenge to attract major retailers, with giant superstores locating instead on nearby sites.

There are plenty of ideas on how to improve the situation. The local council has a strategy in place after public consultation. My MSP colleague Jamie Hepburn and I also did a public consultation and arranged a roundtable of local organisations and community groups in autumn last year. There is enthusiasm for improving the town centre and making it a better fit for the town in which it is based. One key challenge is the co-ordination and co-operation required to make that happen. As well as the practical challenge of dealing with a giant monolithic structure, there are problems with the fact that bits of the town centre are owned by different private companies. Even the streets and public spaces are owned by private companies. In the past year we have been trying to kick-start some action in one part of the town centre that has changed ownership, so we almost have to start again.

What should we take from all this? The new towns were a bold and necessary experiment. When I was preparing for this debate I was interested to read that some of them ended up as a revenue-generating experiment for the Treasury. However, when they were built, there was no planning for the challenges that almost certainly

lay ahead. No sinking fund was put aside for a time when renewal and regeneration would become urgent. Instead, development corporations have handed over more liabilities than assets.

Perhaps in the era of city deals we should campaign for new town deals in recognition of their unique challenges and opportunities. Perhaps we need to look at a role for a more modern and accountable version of the old development corporations that existed previously. In Cumbernauld there is a sort of successor organisation, but I am not convinced it is in the right form or has the resources and powers that it needs. Perhaps that is one thing to look at. I do not know the answer to these problems. There might be completely new solutions.

The hon. Member for Telford mentioned an APPG in her opening speech. That has to be the start of the conversation. I am absolutely up for joining an APPG and I hope we can take forward our discussions and our ideas to overcome the challenges.

3.11 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I give my huge congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan), who initiated this debate. She is a real champion for Telford and has done much to help to improve her town since she was elected.

As has been said, Harlow is 70 this year. Our town was built as a place of aspiration, opportunity and achievement for people, mainly from east London, who lived in poor accommodation. They moved to Harlow for the chance to make their lives better. We are now a sculpture town. Harlow is the birthplace of fibre optic communications. Hon. Members may be pleased to learn we even invented the formula for Bailey's Irish Cream in Harlow.

We have a bright future ahead of us: £400 million is being invested by the Government in Public Health England. We have an enterprise zone. We have one of the best colleges in England, which has led the way in apprenticeships and in helping to deal with the problems of youth unemployment.

I think this is common among new towns, but certainly in Harlow: although we have lower levels of economic capital, we are not as prosperous as we would like to be, and there is significant deprivation, we have incredibly high levels of social capital and community spirit. We have organisations of people looking after one another, including faith groups; charities; neighbourhood associations; residents' groups; housing groups; and many clubs and societies. There is an extraordinary level of social capital that brings people together and makes our town more prosperous.

However, we face three challenges, and my hon. Friend the Member for Telford touched on one of them. The first is reputation. She rightly said that there is a stereotype of new towns. Whenever we have a tragedy or something terrible happens, stereotypical journalism paints Harlow and new towns in a certain way. Journalists go to the worst part of the town and say, "This is what it's like: a place full of anti-social behaviour." They do not go to see the art, the sculptures, or the beautiful new housing estates and the regeneration that is going on. It is incredibly frustrating because it is very damaging. Such reports are damaging because they stop aspirational people coming into new towns. Much of it, of course, involves a huge amount of snobbery.

[*Robert Halfon*]

The second problem, which has been touched on by all hon. Members who have spoken thus far, relates to infrastructure. We were built all at once and we are breaking all at the same time. A lot of money is being invested in our roads, but we do not have enough housing. We are lucky to have huge amounts of green space. Harlow is a beautiful green town, but we do not have enough housing. I am glad new council houses have been built, partly thanks to the new homes bonus from the Government, but housing remains a significant problem. It comes up again and again in my constituency. People are not able to get a house or they live in overcrowded accommodation.

Although we have a lot of investment in infrastructure and roads, there are problems. When the town was built it was imagined that everyone would have one small car with one small garage, so we do not have enough spaces for parking. People now have two cars and there is simply no room to park them, so people park on the grass verges. I hope the Government will use some of the £23 billion infrastructure fund to help new towns. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said there should be a new towns fund, and he is right. If we have a northern powerhouse, we should have a new towns powerhouse.

Many good things are happening in Harlow. We are becoming a scientific, technological and vocational education powerhouse of the east of England. We are becoming a cultural powerhouse, too, with our sculptures and our beautiful Gibberd Gallery, but there has to be a focus on the problems that all the new towns have in common. The regeneration issue is important. Although part of our town centre is beautiful—the water gardens particularly—the other part badly needs regeneration and new builds. However, the money cannot come unless we have more housing. By the time we get more housing, it will have been a long time coming. The Government must look at where town centres badly need funding and support.

Our hospital was built a while ago and we desperately need a new one. The Health Secretary has visited Princess Alexandra Hospital three times. Its brilliant staff provide a wonderful service, even though we have had difficulties. The hospital is literally not fit for purpose—sewage gets into the operating theatres—so I urge the Minister to lobby the Health Secretary for a new hospital. He has said that if capital funding is available, Harlow will be considered as a top priority for a new hospital.

I will conclude because I know other Members wish to speak. As I have said, Harlow is very much an apprenticeship and vocational town. The Government's investment in skills and apprenticeships is important. Anglia Ruskin University is introducing degree apprenticeships for our residents. Our schools are greatly improving, but we need to do more to make sure our children are educated even better and to ensure schools improve across the board.

I said that Harlow is a place of aspiration, opportunity and achievement. If we get continued investment from the Government, if there is a focus on new towns, and if we can use part of that £23 billion infrastructure fund to focus on the desperate needs that new towns have and to deal with the deprivation and infrastructure problems that we have, not only can we celebrate our 70th birthday, but we will easily be fit for another 70 years.

3.19 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this excellent and timely debate and on speaking so comprehensively about the importance of new towns. I welcome the debate and our focus on the challenges that new towns face. I want first to examine how we got here and why wonderful new towns such as East Kilbride in my constituency came into existence.

Housing conditions in Scotland were a major concern after the second world war. There were overcrowded tenement dwellings in Scotland's cities. Between the two world wars there had been some tenement clearance and new building programmes, but in many cases what was built was just as inadequate as the housing it had replaced. Decentralisation would be achieved by expanding existing towns in the region, encouraging industrial growth in other parts of Scotland and building new towns. In response to the plan, the new town of East Kilbride was designated just one year later, in 1947.

As many hon. Members will be aware, I grew up in the Westwood area of East Kilbride. Aztec Camera went “from Westwood to Hollywood”; I have managed only to go from Westwood to Westminster, but it is certainly a first for my family. It is an honour to represent my new town—a town that filled my family, moving from Glasgow, with hope and provided job opportunities, new green living spaces and somewhere to bring up a family where there were education, health and other resources that we could only have dreamed of. It is amazing to think that we are now celebrating East Kilbride's 70th anniversary. I pay tribute to all those involved in the anniversary celebrations and in making sure the new town continues to thrive.

The emphasis on foreign direct investment and trade was part of the work associated with East Kilbride Development Corporation decades ago. That, alongside housing, was very successful. It was a programme of continued development, and one that is now sadly missed by most of my constituents. It is important to recognise the success that the development corporation had. The approach adopted for areas of housing in the Stewartfield and Lindsayfield areas embraced urban green spaces, at James Hamilton heritage park. As in many other new towns, there was a focus on creating a pleasant living environment, and Calderglen country park and the National Museum of Rural Life are perfect examples of our many visitor attractions.

Today's debate is about challenges. Over the decades East Kilbride has experienced the loss of key industries. Rolls-Royce moved out of our town just the other year, as did Motorola before that; we were previously thought of as a great semiconductor town in Scottish industry. Now, under the UK Government's plans, we face the challenge of losing the office of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. We must invest in our new towns, create jobs there and maintain those that keep them thriving. I urge the Minister to do all he can to ensure that happens, including revisiting the plans for HMRC. An impact assessment would show that the plans could decimate the new town, and surely he does not want that to happen within his remit.

The focus of the debate is on challenges, but I believe that East Kilbride has a vibrant future, entailing, for example, a modern shopping centre complete with a new leisure hub. I would like to see a new designer outlet mall, although my husband clearly does not want such a development. The town centre needs a bit of a facelift; we are very proud of our town, so we want to make sure that happens. We also need manufacturing, jobs and livelihoods to be brought into the 21st century, so during the summer recess I shall host my day of international trade and development for East Kilbride. I hope that the new Chair—elected today—of the International Trade Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), will open the event, and that we will have representatives from many of the great trading centres of the world, including China, Hong Kong and Japan. I hope that they will speak about why it is so important to invest in our new town, and that we can continue to build such links.

In future it will be important for me to maintain my role on the newly developed East Kilbride taskforce. My key focus is on jobs, livelihood and trade. We need to focus on the town's unique selling point, and give that the priority it deserves, across Scotland and the United Kingdom: we have excellent low-carbon ideas and aspirations, and we want to become the UK's low-carbon town. We want new town development plans; they should be ongoing and ours should not die with the sad demise of the East Kilbride Development Corporation. The taskforce and key stakeholders across the town, including our MSP, are working hard to make sure that we regenerate and continue to build. It is important for us to retain the jobs at HMRC. The impact assessment indicates that that will be vital.

I call on the UK Government to invest in new towns, not just in new city deals. We are connected in our new town, with its multitude of roundabouts. Indeed, I will check the figures to see whether the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) is ahead of us on roundabouts—East Kilbride is widely known and loved as Polo mint city, so I need to check the veracity of that nickname.

East Kilbride is a shining example of a wonderful new town. I want to work with all key stakeholders at council, Scottish Government and UK Government level, to ensure that it will continue to shine. I will do all I can to push for investment and trade. I would like to attend the all-party group described by the hon. Member for Telford, which is a wonderful idea. There is much to be done, but we will make it our priority across the House. I could not recommend East Kilbride more highly to people throughout the UK and beyond. Come to work, live in and visit East Kilbride.

3.26 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing it. I am also proud to represent the new town of Redditch. Something that we have in common with other hon. Members present is the fact that famous or notable people came from our town, including a gentleman who has just been commemorated by a blue plaque—John Bonham, the Led Zeppelin guitarist. Hon. Members may know the song “Stairway to Heaven”; I sometimes think of its lovely lines when I am climbing one of the stairways in this place.

Redditch was built as a new town in the 1960s, to accommodate people from a rapidly expanding Birmingham. Somewhat similarly to what my hon. Friend the Member for Telford described, we are a centre of gravity for Birmingham, but in the other direction. To this day, Redditch is a desirable commuter town and there is significant demand for housing, because of natural growth and migration. The concern that Redditch residents raise with me is land availability, and the need for developers to find a balance that protects and sustains the green spaces and environments that are such a distinctive feature of the town.

The purpose of creating the local plan is to locate growth, limit commuting out of Redditch, make the best use of existing highway infrastructure, and promote sustainable transport options, while also creating a place where businesses can thrive. What conversations has my hon. Friend the Minister had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on ensuring that businesses are attracted to new towns as well as to urban centres? We in Redditch want that idea to be promoted.

There are parts of the town centre in need of regeneration, because of neglect over a period of years—something my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) raised about his constituency as well. People in our town also have a perception that there are safety issues, because of antisocial behaviour and crime. I welcome the fact that all local plans must be accompanied by sustainability appraisals. Redditch Borough Council has undertaken discussions about that, but residents are still understandably concerned about the effect, particularly on surrounding services and transport systems, of expanding developments in the area. What regular discussions has the Department had with the Department for Transport and rail operating companies to ensure that new towns such as Redditch have transport links to connect them to major urban centres such as Birmingham, so that residents who work there can get to work easily?

Webheath is a beautiful rural area of Redditch. A problem for my constituents is the fact that land there has been identified for expanding development. It is on the south-west boundary of Redditch's urban centre, and between 400 and 600 dwellings are proposed. It is a difficult issue for residents. I welcome housing and accept the need to provide it, but residents feel that developing the land in that way will be intrusive. The development is likely to proceed, but there is a risk of flooding, and the roads are inadequate—there are lanes, not roads, and we do not have pavements. A great deal of investment is required to make the development safe.

Also, the services of Diamond Buses are inadequate; people are being let down on their daily journeys to work, and left stranded in outlying areas. Redditch has one of the lowest levels of car ownership in the country, and one in five households have no access to a vehicle, which shows how important the bus services are in people's daily lives. I regularly meet councillors in those areas to raise constituents' concerns, because many rely on public transport to get around.

I therefore ask the Minister to consider the overall redesign and expansion of Redditch, and to work with borough councils and neighbouring local authorities, because development is often driven by neighbouring local authorities and impinges on Redditch, which is in

[*Rachel Maclean*]

a different council area. We need to make sure that councils work together across the piece to mitigate the impact of those decisions strategically.

I support providing for the increasing population of Redditch, but I feel that further consideration must be given to the impact it has on services and infrastructure. I have already mentioned our hospital, and I make no apologies for mentioning it again—it is the No. 1 issue we face in Redditch. People are rightly worried that their town will grow, because it is a growing town with a young population. We want to see long-term, sustainable plans for health, not the sudden removal of services that then becomes permanent, because that has a negative effect on peoples' perception of how they are being treated. Redditch residents feel that they deserve services in their town just as much as neighbouring Worcester does. I share those concerns, and I do not want my residents to feel that they are being unfairly overlooked in that regard. I welcome the APPG initiative and will give it my full support.

3.31 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to sum up the debate on behalf of the Scottish National party. As I explained in my maiden speech—it seems a long time ago now—although my constituency is called Glenrothes, slightly more than 50% of my constituents do not live in the town of Glenrothes. I think it is disrespectful for the name of the constituency to ignore that fact. As a lot of hon. Members alluded to, many new towns were planted in the middle of established communities, which are sometimes very concerned about maintaining their own identities. I will continue to ensure that officialdom recognises the identities of the many disparate communities in the Glenrothes constituency that are not in Glenrothes.

As a long-term resident of the town itself, I will make some comments on what a wonderful place it is to live. However, let me first commend the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for securing the debate and all hon. Members who have spoken for the clear passion they have demonstrated for the new towns they represent and their pride in the people in those towns. Although we have heard a lot about roads and roundabouts, and schools and roundabouts, and houses and roundabouts, and shopping centres and roundabouts, this is about people. All of those things were supposed to have been built for people, and with hindsight I sometimes wonder what the architects and town planners thought the people were supposed to do.

A large part of the problem, certainly in Glenrothes, is legacy; the well-intentioned people who planned the town all those years ago had no idea what kind of town they needed to produce for the 21st century. I think that one difficulty is that society was a lot more paternalistic then. Glenrothes was built on precincts with a typical population of 2,000, although some were quite a bit smaller. Those precincts would often have a primary school and what was charmingly described as a tenants' meeting room that typically held about 50 or 60 people. There was nowhere within the precincts where the community could meet. A lot of the communities did not have a polling station big enough for everybody to go and vote at on the same day. The vast majority of

amenities were to be in the town centre, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned.

Another big difficulty became relevant shortly after I was first elected as a councillor in the town in 1992, because the new town development corporation was wound up in 1995–96. We expected all of its functions to be taken over by the new unitary Fife Council, but the Government of the day—as represented by Michael Forsyth, the Scotland Office Minister for everything—were keen to sell off as much as possible in order to keep it out of the hands of the elected council.

Our town centre was sold off, as were a lot of the industrial estates, such as the Whitehill industrial estate on the western edge of the town, with disastrous results. The neighbourhood shopping centres were sold off, and the Glenwood centre in Glenrothes has been in the ownership of, I think, three different bankrupt or liquidated companies. All of those facilities, which should have been maintained for the benefit of local people, have been allowed to run down because they were sold off for short-term gain, often to people with neither the capacity nor even the will to make them succeed in the longer term. I thought it interesting that the hon. Member for Telford referred to that.

Having said that, there have been several successes in the town, a lot of which are down to the people—sometimes for taking things on board for themselves, sometimes for forcing the council, the Scottish Government, the UK Government and everybody else to deliver what was needed. During my time as a councillor, we saw a new dental centre and a new health centre built at Glenwood in west Glenrothes, a new secondary school built to replace the former Auchmuty High School, the new Michael Woods sports and leisure centre built to replace the aging and almost literally collapsing 1970s sport centre.

We are also in the process of seeing a new residential care home at South Parks to replace two older homes—I give credit to the former Labour Administration in Fife Council for delivering that. We have also seen a lot of investment in a sports hub for the community at Gilvenbank in the north of the town, and there has been an excellent community initiative at Over Stenton playing fields in the south of the town to provide a home for the Glenrothes Strollers, who have previously been awarded community club of the year by the Scottish Football Association.

What is remarkable about all of that to some Members here, but is just accepted by those of us on the Scottish National party Benches, is that the total private finance initiative liability for all of those community facilities is nil. If the political will is there, all of that can be done without mortgaging future generations to the mercies of international financial conglomerates. I hope the UK Government listen to this, because there is a better way to finance large-scale public investment.

I mentioned the people of the town I am so fortunate to represent. Since the start of the general election campaign, the people have run very successful large and small community events in Macedonia, at St Ninian's Church in Tanshall, in Collydean, Gilvanbank, Collydean again, at Over Stenton and at Woodside. All of that happened in a town that a lot of people said did not have any community spirit. It was felt that, being a new town, people tended to live their own lives and never really interact with one another. I think a lot of the

credit for that community spirit belongs particularly to our primary schools, because they tend to bring families together in a way that few institutions can.

A big fillip to the town over the past 10 or 15 years has been the influx of young families from central Europe. Because Glenrothes was designated as a new town 59 years ago, the population has tended to age with the town, and a lot of our communities were in danger of growing too old. The influx of younger families from other parts of Europe has been of huge benefit, and I hope it will be allowed to continue.

If I had one ask, what my town needs, as I suspect do a lot of towns represented here, is significant public sector investment. The private sector will simply not fix this problem on its own. If the political will is there, the money can be found, and all of the towns represented here can be turned into towns that their residents desire and deserve.

3.38 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing the debate, and I wish her town and the respective constituency towns of the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) a happy birthday. I also welcome the Minister to his new post in what I believe is his first outing. Is he the Minister for pubs? For the northern powerhouse? For devolution? Yes? All of the above, but not for parks, apparently, which I think his predecessor was. I think he should fight for that, given the comments today on green spaces in new towns.

Nobody listening to the debate can have failed to hear the passion and pride that all hon. Members have in their new towns—or cities, as in the case of Milton Keynes. The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) certainly demonstrated a “Whole Lotta Love” for her town—as well as for Led Zeppelin—while recognising the challenges faced by new towns.

As the anniversaries show, many new towns no longer consider themselves new and, as hon. Members have outlined, there is now a need to look to renewal and investment. I am afraid that some of the issues raised today have only been exacerbated since 2010. As the hon. Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) said, many town centres across the UK have been starved of investment and are in desperate need of regeneration. The Government will surely have to look at the complications mentioned of dealing with multiple private companies in town centres when trying to address this. I have been looking closely at regeneration with my local authority and Departments to try to improve the situation in my constituency of Great Grimsby, so I am well aware of the difficulties and challenges that people face.

The Government, of course, commissioned Mary Portas to write a review of the future of high streets in 2011, but she slammed them just three years later for making only “token gestures” in response. Many of the things we have heard today reflect a frustration that, on the one hand, the Government say they want to support towns, new towns and house building, but on the other, as two hon. Members mentioned, there is a loss of

Government jobs in these towns. Those jobs are critical for not only the local economy but individuals. The loss of HMRC jobs—really good, secure jobs—is having an impact in my constituency as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) and the hon. Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for Redditch mentioned transport infrastructure. There was quite a strong emphasis on rail, but I was pleased also to hear a reference to buses. There is a significant issue around bus transportation, particularly for those on lower incomes. Buses are essential, but unfortunately since 2010 funding for buses across England and Wales has been cut by a third, with thousands of routes cut or downgraded as a result. Ensuring that there are good bus routes is essential for people’s ability to move around their local areas.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind birthday wishes to Harlow on its 70th anniversary. She mentioned Government jobs, but would it be fair to say that that does not reflect the whole picture? I mentioned that the Government invested £400 million to bring Public Health England to Harlow, to make us, except for Atlanta in the United States, the public health science capital of the world. That will bring thousands of jobs, including skilled scientific jobs, to our town.

Melanie Onn: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency is benefiting from that investment. I am sure that lots of Members around the room will be hoping for something similar or the same; I certainly would not be disappointed if the Minister came to me and offered something similar.

Broadband, which I thought might come up, has not been touched on today. In 2015 we were promised ultrafast broadband to nearly all homes in the country. Maybe someone will leap from their seat and say, “It’s all absolutely fine; we’ve got ultrafast broadband,” but I know that across the board, only a handful of constituencies have more than 1% of connections receiving ultrafast broadband speeds. To make all our towns across the country successful, the Government must take that seriously and press forward on it.

Iain Stewart: I should point out that the National Infrastructure Commission, which is looking at the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor, is not just considering hard infrastructure such as roads, railways and the rest; broadband provision is very much part of its work.

Melanie Onn: Excellent. I could not agree more that soft infrastructure is an essential part of connectivity in new towns.

Dr Cameron: I would also like to comment on broadband. It came to my attention at a constituency surgery recently that there is real concern about new housing estates. If the number of homes being built does not reach a certain number, broadband does not necessarily have to be provided for residents. Residents are buying new houses, expecting broadband to be a feature of what they are buying, but there does not seem to be any legal requirement for it. Will the hon. Lady comment on that?

Melanie Onn: I certainly urge the Minister to consider that. When people purchase new build properties on those estates, modern facilities fit for the 21st century must be part and parcel of them.

[*Melanie Onn*]

Renewal and expansion of the housing stock are clearly issues that face new towns, as the right hon. Member for Harlow in particular highlighted. Under the Conservatives, we have seen the lowest level of house building since the 1920s and the lowest level of affordable house building for a quarter of a century. As rent and house prices have hugely outstripped rises in people's incomes, we now have a generation of young people who cannot afford to buy a home—and not just in London, but right across the country, with the result being 200,000 fewer homeowners today than in 2010.

The hon. Member for Telford spoke of the specific problems for those who buy leasehold properties. Increases in ground rent charges are a particular issue that sees leaseholders being ripped off by developers or management companies and can make it impossible for individuals to sell their property. An APPG on the specific issue raised that in the previous Parliament, but perhaps her new all-party group will consider it as well.

Peter Grant: In Scotland, we have dealt with the problem of extortionate ground rents by abolishing the feudal property system lock, stock and barrel. Might that be worth examining for other parts of the UK?

Melanie Onn: When we are considering these issues, nothing should be off the table. It has to be something workable and reasonable that protects leaseholders. That option will not necessarily be the right solution, but it certainly should be available for consideration.

Labour has proposed capping some of the charges and, in the longer term, ending the routine use of leasehold ownership in developments of new houses entirely. That is an alternative, perhaps, to the suggestion from the hon. Member for Glenrothes. The 2017 housing White Paper pledged 17 new garden towns and villages, but it came five years after the former Prime Minister announced a consultation on new garden cities in his speech to the Institution of Civil Engineers. That delay does not exactly instil confidence that the Government recognise the scale of the housing crisis facing the country today, or the importance of new towns and garden cities to tackling the crisis.

Let us compare and contrast with the Labour Government of 1945. It took the Attlee Government just one year to enact legislation for new towns and to designate Stevenage the first. A new planning system was introduced the next year. Within five years, 10 new towns had been started, with social housing for rent making up the overwhelming majority of new homes built. That shows what Government can achieve if the desire is truly there, which is exactly what the hon. Member for Glenrothes was talking about earlier. Will the Minister update us on the progress of the new garden towns and villages?

The viability of new towns and garden cities relies on the agreement of the local population. They have to be developed in a way that genuinely improves the local area by bringing the jobs and services needed for a real community. When the latest tranche of garden towns and villages was announced in January, the former

Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), said:

"What worries me about all of these announcements...is perhaps it is just a good name to tag on to more housing development rather than somewhere...you'd really want to live, bring up children, work and play."

He went on:

"And if it is not all of those things then we will have failed to actually create new garden cities; we would have just tried to make housing sound more popular."

Will the Minister reassure us today that these proposals are not simply spin on new housing developments but will genuinely reflect the ethos of garden cities?

We have heard today about the higher infrastructure costs faced by new towns. Labour has suggested that in future, new garden cities or towns should retain 100% of the business rates locally, to provide an income stream for those higher costs. Business rate retention was one of a large number of policies dropped in the Queen's Speech, but perhaps the Minister will consider reviving it for new garden cities.

I also want to ask about the need to provide greater protection for those purchasing new build homes, which is of course a particular issue in new towns and villages. I spoke about the Bovis Homes scandal in my previous role as a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee. When I challenged the former housing Minister, now chief of staff to the Prime Minister, on what the Government are doing to safeguard new homeowners from this in future, he told me that a planned announcement had been put on hold when the Prime Minister called the general election. Nothing was brought forward to address the issue in the Conservative manifesto and there was nothing in the Queen's Speech. Perhaps the Minister here today can say what this previously imminent announcement was and when we can expect it.

3.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to have my first outing under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I start by saying happy 70th birthday to Harlow and happy birthday to Telford, Milton Keynes, Stevenage, Crawley and all the other new towns that have an approaching big birthday with a zero in it. I have a birthday with a zero approaching in a couple of years.

It is because we are at such an important crossroads for new towns that I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for this debate today. It gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to new towns and recognise their continuing role in delivering the Government's house building agenda. It is important to look at the lessons to be learned from the new towns programme so that, as we move forward and build garden towns, villages and cities, we do not make the same mistakes.

I welcome the way in which new towns can now work together, and not just at local authority level. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's idea of an all-party parliamentary group, which will start an important conversation here in Parliament. The Town and Country Planning Association's new town network is doing great work and I have a copy of its report here.

I will focus initially on the new town in my hon. Friend's constituency, which in many ways is leading the Government's thinking on new towns. Like all new towns, Telford is testament to the fact that place making never ends. The town has grown to be a success story as the commercial gateway to Shropshire over many years, but it faces some challenges. Parts of Telford have ageing infrastructure. The problem is not restricted to Telford and today we have heard many colleagues talking about that. The contemporaneous obsolescence test in new towns is that if everything is built at the same time, everything wears out at the same time, which poses real challenges.

In addition, the development style of many new towns, which during the '60s and '70s was the height of modernity, especially in our town centres, can look outdated and often does not provide the modern shopping experience that consumers demand today. Telford and other new towns have risen to the challenge and in 2016 the Government signed a unique land deal with Telford in which they committed £44.5 million from land sales to reinvest in Telford's infrastructure. At the same time, we will deliver 2,800 new homes and create 8,500 jobs. Telford has been successful in several rounds of growth deal funding to improve its infrastructure, to build a new bus station—linking to the comments on buses—and to invest in skills. The growth deal for Telford is precisely the sort of forward-looking approach that we would welcome from all new towns up and down the country and could be progressed through the housing deal flagged in the recent White Paper.

My hon. Friend asked what we will do about the new towns legislation, which is hugely important for all our new towns. We have legislated through the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 to enable the creation of locally accountable new town development corporations to provide powerful and effective delivery options for garden towns, so that updating has already taken place.

Telford, like so many of our new towns, is a dynamic and exciting place to live. We have heard from representatives of all new towns that they all seem to be dynamic and exciting. Telford has halved its unemployment since 2010 and doubled its apprenticeships. Its business start-ups are up, its housing starts are up and even my hon. Friend's share of the vote at the recent general election was up, which I welcome. It shows, as we have heard today, what a difference a fantastically hard-working MP, on whatever side of House they sit, can make for their town. Telford is one of the most economically successful towns in the midlands and its gross value added and employment are on a par with many areas of the south.

We have also heard from colleagues from across the Chamber. The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) talked well about Skem. I am from the area and I know that it is not universally known as Skelmersdale; we call it Skem. Lancashire County Council and the local enterprise partnership are working on a plan for Skelmersdale railway station and I hope the hon. Lady will come forward with bids to the housing infrastructure fund. She spoke very well about some of the challenges of the infrastructure in Skelmersdale. I am pleased there is good news locally with major employers such as Flavourfresh and Huntapac reflecting the growing economy around Skelmersdale.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) spoke about the challenges, but it is clear she has real pride in her town and I know that she will be a powerhouse on the APPG. The idea of an international trade exhibition promoting a new town is excellent.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) is supporting local proposals for high-quality transformation and growth for Harlow through the Harlow and Gilston garden town proposal that he supports. New new towns, as I think we will now have to call them, must learn lessons from old new towns like Harlow. We welcome bids from Harlow and all the new towns to the infrastructure fund that he spoke so well about.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) spoke about his town centre, which faces challenges like many other new towns.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) spoke about smart cities and the Opposition spokesman also spoke about the importance of embedding infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, in our new towns for their plan for the future.

On a recent visit to the new Metro Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, I was particularly interested that he is talking about a digital domesday book held locally to put on record the infrastructure as it is today. By mapping the existing infrastructure it is hoped that we can future-proof the expansion of towns to ensure that we are not repeatedly digging up our roads. I welcome his enthusiasm for the National Infrastructure Commission and agree that this is an exciting opportunity for local growth.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke about her town. I know that she welcomed the North Worcester Engineering Centre, which was opened by the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), showing that Ministers of that Department are constantly in contact with her and her town. I note that the local enterprise partnership has plans to create 2,300 new jobs in the area.

Turning to the Opposition spokesman's comments, I will not take lectures from anyone in the Labour party about the rate of house building. The lowest house building rate anywhere in the country was in John Prescott's proposed eco towns. The problem with them, unlike our garden city proposals, was that their direction was top down, forcing housing, often in the wrong place where people did not want it, on communities. What is so exciting about our proposals for garden towns and cities is that they are locally led. We all know from our constituency role that development is often opposed, but when there is buy-in from the community from the first day, it makes it much easier to deliver.

In Bicester, we have already had 1,000 starts. In Ebbsfleet, 350 properties have been completed. In Northants garden community, Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough, 650 homes have been built and in Aylesbury Vale there are 2,500 starts, showing that this Government are absolutely determined to deliver our promise to build more than 23,000 homes in new towns.

[*Jake Berry*]

There is still a problem with new towns and people's perception of them, and the APPG could work on that to ensure that towns that may previously have been associated with roundabouts, with or without traffic lights, and with decay and ageing town centres start to be the leading lights of our country. I hope and believe that, when the APPG is formed, it will invite me to address it and that I can talk about our progress under the recent housing White Paper to ensure that we build a record number of homes in this Parliament, and emphasise that new towns and new new towns continue to be a focus for this Government and a fantastic place for people to live, work, raise a family, own a car, drive round roundabouts and live their lives as happily and freely as they can.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered challenges facing new towns.

Ambulance Services (Devon)

[*GERAINT DAVIES in the Chair*]

4 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered ambulance services in Devon.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Let me say at the outset that we all pay tribute to our blue light services and that this debate is not in any way intended to criticise them. The intention is to set out the challenges that they confront and to celebrate their professionalism and the work that they do, but also to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to address some key issues that they face in Devon and, in particular, in my constituency.

The debate has been triggered by a number of incidents. People have contacted me either directly or indirectly to raise concerns about long waiting times faced by my constituents; an incident that typifies the situation happened last month. An elderly lady was left for two hours at the roadside, on a baking hot day, waiting for a paramedic crew to arrive. She had serious neck injuries and was in some distress. Were it not for the kindness of passing strangers, things might have been even worse, but a consultant anaesthetist happened to be passing and was able to provide critical assistance at the scene, and the lady also had assistance from the police and from staff from South Hams Community Hospital. As a result, the outcome has been good, but it could have been very different. That has caused a great deal of concern, because it is not an isolated incident. Although much of the focus of my speech will understandably be on the critical, type 1 cases, which require a response within eight minutes—everyone understands that—I would like the Minister also to think about those other cases that we are all coming across in our constituencies which are not immediately life threatening but are nevertheless very serious and where the outcome can be very different unless we see a timely response from our ambulance services.

First, I would like to address demand, which is rising at an extraordinary rate. During the five years to 2016-17, over the area of the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust we have seen a considerable rise in demand, but there has been a 19.2% increase in the Totnes constituency alone, a 29% increase in Plymouth and a 23.7% increase in Torbay. The challenge is far greater in a rural setting, for obvious reasons. The SWASFT area is the most rural area in England; and if we look at the activity for Devon, we see that 23.5% of SWASFT's activity is in that county, but that is matched by only 22.2% of its funding.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much appreciate the debate that my hon. Friend has introduced in the Chamber today. She is making a very good point about the rurality of Devon, which is one of the largest counties in the country. Of course, the issue is not just its size. If one starts going north-south, there are no really fast roads—we need much more done to the north Devon link road. Apart from the scale of the county, however, the issue is about getting an ambulance to an incident in time and our very scattered population. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am sure that

Ministers are aware of the size of Devon, but there is also the question of the time it takes to get from A to B if one is not going on major roads.

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Of course, as we know, demand can escalate considerably during the peak summer times, but many of our roads are single-track ones with passing spaces, and it can be very difficult to get an ambulance resource to the scene in a timely manner.

My first point to the Minister is that there are no concessions for rurality; there is no funding premium to allow SWASFT to meet the extra demands that it faces. In fact, overall, its funding has fallen by 2.46% per incident in 2017-18, compared with 2014-15. It has to meet the huge increase in demand with shrinking resource, in what is one of the most challenged areas in England because of rurality. I would like the Minister to acknowledge that key point and the impact of rurality on response times.

My second point to the Minister is that although overall SWASFT is doing a good job in meeting the performance target of 75% of category 1 calls receiving a response within eight minutes, that does rather mask the picture in the most rural parts of the area. Let us take the South Devon and Torbay clinical commissioning group area as a whole, for which we have some data that show that it just meets the target, with the figure of 75.65% of calls. If we look at the breakdown for the Totnes constituency, we see that during the past three months the figure has been 61%, so my point to my hon. Friend is that, when considering a county such as Devon, he should look not just at the overall, top-line figure, but at the impact in the most rural parts of the constituencies. I hope that he will ask for that as an ongoing measure, as a response to this debate.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): There is a specific example of exactly what is being described by my hon. Friend in my constituency of North Devon—the situation in Lynton and Lynmouth, the twin villages right on the north coast. At the beginning of last week, the South Western ambulance trust withdrew what was in effect a rapid-response paramedic vehicle that was traditionally stationed in Lynton and Lynmouth, specifically because of the rurality and the distance from anywhere else of those two villages. There is a lot of concern in the community because that service has been withdrawn. I pay tribute to the CCG, which is looking for an alternative arrangement, but the fear is that there is still a gap, and the response time, because of the distance of Lynton and Lynmouth from everywhere else, is key. May I ask my hon. Friend the Minister, through my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), to consider that particular example?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Likewise, very considerable concerns have been raised in my constituency about the withdrawal this month of rapid-response vehicles from Dartmouth and Kingsbridge and in Totnes. I understand the reasoning that double-crewed ambulances can provide the conveyance that people need to hospital and that utilisation of the single vehicles is less—about 24%. I understand the rationale behind it, but equally I ask the Minister to respond to precisely the concerns that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) has

raised, because the worry in communities such as mine is that once the double-crewed ambulances are conveying a casualty to an urban centre, they tend not to come back again, whereas the rapid-response vehicles did. There is a genuine concern about how we will ensure that the double-crewed ambulances come back.

As I have said, I welcome the increase in the double-crewed ambulance resource as the rapid-response vehicles come away, and I am aware of the data whereby efforts are being made to provide a reassuring response that actually the number of hours in total will increase. However, that change is just coming in this month, and I would like the Minister to assure the House today that he will look very closely at the data as they emerge over the next few months, to ensure that those vehicles are returning to the rural areas, because I fear that otherwise we will again see that SWASFT is meeting the overall, top-line target for the entire patch, but that will be at the expense of rural constituencies such as my own, where there will simply be a worsening of the response. We need to look at that very closely, and I would like the Minister to assure me that, following this debate, he will specifically ask SWASFT to ensure that there is a response available and it does not worsen in the rural parts of Devon.

I would also like to address the matter of the workforce, which is an issue across the NHS as the Minister knows. Within our paramedic resource there is actually an 11% turnover of paramedic staff, in part because they are such a skilled and valued workforce, which means in many cases they are being attracted into other parts of the NHS, for example to work in casualty departments and minor injuries units. Everyone can understand that, but we need to make sure that we are recruiting and retaining within our blue light response services as well. For example, there are currently about 100 vacancies over the whole of the SWASFT area, and 16 whole time equivalent vacancies in Devon alone. What is the Minister doing to work alongside Health Education England to address the workforce issues? I will again make the point I have done in previous debates about the impact of the pay cap on the recruitment, retention and morale of the workforce. Again, I call on Ministers to consider giving the pay review bodies greater flexibility to be able to increase the rates of pay.

We know that there are pressures on our ambulance services, but we cannot view them in isolation. I would like the Minister to consider the impact that this is having on our other blue light services, particularly the police. They have raised some worrying concerns with me about not only the amount of time that they are having to spend on scene—as they did the other day in the incident that I described—while they wait for an ambulance resource to arrive, but the fact that on occasion they themselves have to take people to hospital who should really be conveyed by an ambulance resource. To clarify, in May this year there were 226 incidents where an ambulance was requested but no ambulances were available to be assigned in the Devon and Cornwall police area, and in June there were 158. These long waits are having a knock-on on the police's ability to carry out their other duties, and that should concern us all.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way and congratulate her on securing this much needed debate. As she will be aware,

[*Kevin Foster*]

it is not only the police who are experiencing long waits. One of my constituents, Susannah Tandy, has got in touch about an incident a week ago when her 12-year-old son fell 11 foot from a tree. An ambulance was called at 1 pm but did not arrive until about quarter to 4. These sorts of waits not only build up anxiety but could see situations get much worse. Thankfully Murphy appears to be making a recovery, but it could have been a lot worse.

Dr Wollaston: I think we are all glad to hear that Murphy is making a good recovery. As my hon. Friend says, we must focus not just on the immediately life-threatening incidents but on the kinds of incidents that he described, where an ambulance is very important and somebody's condition could deteriorate because of a long wait. For SWASFT we must keep an eye on not just the category 1 incidents, but the others as well, and I hope the Minister will do so.

In this debate we should also celebrate the successes, because there are undoubtedly those as well. We have seen examples of very good co-working between our blue light services. For example, in the “collapsed behind closed doors” scheme fire services co-operate with the ambulance service where there are concerns that somebody might be collapsed in a residence. In the past the police may have responded, but now the fire service can also provide that assistance, and I pay tribute to those co-responders in the fire service. From my time as a rural GP in Chagford, I remember the number of occasions when people phoned me in surprise because the fire service had arrived instead of the ambulance service, but it is actually providing a fantastic resource. On occasions when it is absolutely critical that somebody has a defibrillator on site as soon as possible, the fire service can and does perform an amazing job. We have got further to go, particularly in remote rural communities where a fire resource might be closer to hand. I hope the Minister will look at how we can go further to make sure that we develop a multi-skilled workforce who are properly rewarded for the expertise and skills that they develop across the fire service.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The ambulance crews across Devon do a fantastic job. I represent an urban seat in Plymouth, but the demand that is placed on both urban and rural ambulance services has a knock-on effect, because there is no wall that divides Plymouth from the rest of Devon. Demand needs to be understood between both urban and rural areas. Will the hon. Lady comment on what happens in the summer months when the south-west becomes an even more popular tourist destination and additional demand is placed on not only the ambulance services but our wider emergency services? That moves the ambulance resources out of their normal patterns. Ambulances are increasingly moved to further away places with longer response times than their normal patterns might take them.

Dr Wollaston: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. He will know that for both our ambulance services and our police services those kinds of influxes from outside are not adequately reflected in the funding formula. That is in addition to the rurality that he referred to. In fact, the key point remains that the

greater danger is to people living in rural areas where, for example, a resource might take somebody to Derriford Hospital but not return, and then when the ambulance service dispatches the nearest ambulance it will be in Derriford. That is why ambulance services tend to get tied up.

I would briefly like to mention the impact of the 111 service. SWASFT is doing extremely well—it is, in fact, the best-performing in the country—at treating patients at home rather than conveying them to hospital. That is the so-called “see and treat” model, and they are also doing well with “hear and treat”. However, there is a concern about the increase in calls, because there has been an overall increase in calls of 24% for the whole of the SWASFT area over five years, with 470 more calls per day, although only an additional 81 people per day are having to go to hospital. While that may reflect the great success of paramedics’ expertise in seeing and treating at home, will the Minister consider whether it also reflects unnecessary calls and the impact of 111, which has been raised many times in this House? Are too many people still having an ambulance called on their behalf when it could have been avoided?

Finally, I would like to end on a positive note in thanking all our volunteers who do so much to save lives across Devon, working alongside our blue light services. I would like to praise all those who support our Devon air ambulance service, all the volunteer community first responders and those who support, fund and supply defibrillators in our communities. On behalf of all in this House, we thank them and our wonderful paramedics and ambulance service crews.

4.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I wish you every success in your endeavours elsewhere today. On that note, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on securing not only this debate but unopposed re-election to the Chair of the Select Committee on Health, which role I am delighted to see her continue in.

By happy coincidence, I had the pleasure of visiting the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust only last week. Having visited the chief executive in his office, and seen for myself some of the challenges presented by the rurality and the distances—as mentioned by hon. Members in this debate—I feel slightly better briefed than I would otherwise have been. I drove from Exeter to Barnstaple to Plymouth on the same day, in the height of summer, on a Friday, when the roads were, it is fair to say, not at their least busy. I do absolutely appreciate some of the challenges reflected in this debate that are imposed on the ambulance service’s ability to deliver the service to residents in this large, very rural and very beautiful county. It is particularly appropriate therefore that we have the chance to discuss this briefly this afternoon.

I thank my hon. Friend for the characteristically considerate and appropriate way she posed challenges to me and thanked people employed in the ambulance service, and those who support it as volunteers, for the magnificent work that they do. She began her speech by recognising that the ambulance service in the south-west, like all other ambulance services in the country, is busier than ever. Demand has been rising significantly.

Across the country, there were some 7 million face-to-face responses from the ambulance service in the year ending 31 March—a 14% increase over the last five years. In the south-west of England, demand has increased even more sharply, with a 29% increase over five years; I think she mentioned a 19% increase in her area of south Devon.

The trust is challenged by the geography of the area it serves, with its greater distances and slower transport routes. Nevertheless, it is doing well, not just in meeting national targets but in comparison with other trusts. We should congratulate all those involved, but that does not mean that there are not a number of challenges. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes mentioned a particularly difficult case in which an elderly lady was left waiting for some time, and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) raised a case from his constituency in which a child had to wait some time for an ambulance.

This is clearly an operational issue. I strongly encourage hon. Members who are concerned about individual cases to bring them to the attention of the chief executive of the relevant trust, and to continue to represent to their constituents that even if the overall number of such incidents is not great, the ambulance service is required to provide an appropriate response through the disposition of its resources. From experience in my own area, I know that MPs are listened to by chief executives of ambulance trusts and can make a difference in securing deployment of resource to meet the particular demands and concerns of their constituents. It is well worth pursuing that approach.

Let me touch on some of the initiatives under way to meet the challenges that we all recognise and that have been referred to in the debate. Sir Bruce Keogh undertook a review of the NHS urgent and emergency care system, which is trying to cope with the root causes of demand. Following the review's recommendations, ambulance services will increasingly be transformed into mobile treatment centres, with greater use of "hear and treat", in which telephone calls are closed with advice, and "see and treat", in which paramedics are equipped to treat patients on the scene without a conveyance. There will also be greater integration with the rest of the health system. Some 2,600 more paramedics are now operating within our ambulance services across the country than in 2010, and in the past year 1,400 trainees have started on paramedic courses. There has been a big shift towards training more ambulance staff to undertake treatment on the ground.

The Care Quality Commission has recognised that SWASFT is one of the highest-performing trusts in England, particularly in its "hear and treat" service, which enables clinicians to assess and triage patients over the phone and close the call without the need to send an ambulance. In April, 49.1% of calls to SWASFT were resolved without transportation to A&E—the highest percentage of any trust in England. That allows more patients to be treated in their own home or in the community without needing to be taken to hospital, helping not only the patient, but the system.

Another way in which SWASFT is addressing the growing demand for services and the need to better manage peaks of activity is through reviewing how emergency vehicles and staff are rostered. Its review has

moved ambulance resources closer to areas of high public demand. Instead of a paramedic crew logging on for a shift at a rural station and then getting pulled into an urban area—an issue highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes as a particular challenge in her constituency—resources should now be positioned in the right places and should stay more local, more of the time. She expressed a degree of scepticism about whether that is actually happening. I can confirm that in my area in the west midlands, we have worked with the ambulance service to ensure that ambulance stations are not necessarily kept in the same physical location, but are placed in parts of the country where demand is highest. This can now be well mapped by ambulance systems to ensure that service is provided as close to areas of demand as possible.

Evidence from the trust's rota review shows that the patients with the most serious, time-critical and life-threatening injuries have experienced improvements in response times, and that ambulance resources stay local more of the time. My hon. Friend makes a perfectly reasonable challenge for that to be proven—for the facts that demonstrate it to be provided to Members of Parliament and the public—and I will encourage the trust to provide that information.

My hon. Friend and other hon. Members referred to the trust's fleet. It is being reviewed to enable the right resource to be sent the first time. The trust has invested £3.6 million, which has allowed an additional 61 double-crewed ambulances—an increase of 20%—across the operational area, meaning that in South Devon four more double-crewed ambulances will be available this year than last year. This approach has allowed a reduction in rapid response vehicles, which—as my hon. Friend said—are not being utilised as fully as the ambulance crews themselves and are therefore not always the best resource to send.

There are now some 57 fewer rapid response vehicles. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) highlighted some areas in which that has caused local concern. I would say to him that the ambulance service needs to demonstrate to local people that fully crewed paramedic-staffed ambulances are now more readily available to serve communities, so that the people in most need of conveyance to hospital are more likely to get there more quickly. The trust needs to demonstrate that as it moves its resources to this new pattern.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is aware of the ongoing review of the way in which ambulance services respond to calls through the ambulance response programme. SWASFT has been involved in piloting new operating models. The new programme seeks to deliver clinically appropriate responses to all patients and is part of ensuring that the ambulance service in England remains sustainable. The evidence behind the ARP is extensive, covering data collected from more than 14 million emergency 999 calls. The review has looked at a number of key issues for the south-west, including the provision of ambulance services in rural areas and putting an end to unacceptably long waits by removing the long tail of ambulance response times.

A revised operating model is crucial to achieving sustainability in the ambulance service, given the growing demand that we have all described. Trials have been independently evaluated, and the Secretary of State has

[*Mr Philip Dunne*]

recently received recommendations from NHS England. I hope to report to the House the ARP's findings and NHS England's recommendations shortly.

In addition, SWASFT has adopted a number of recommendations to improve response times, particularly in rural areas. One such initiative, which my hon. Friend referred to, is the increasing use of community first responder groups across the south-west. Totnes is one of the focuses for the next phase of recruitment in South Devon, which will start later this month. There are some 458 community first responders and a further 110 fire co-responders across the county, alongside the network of public access defibrillators that she mentioned. SWASFT is in discussions with three of its local fire services about introducing a conveyance and support service by fire crews, which would help to supplement conveyance when ambulances are not available. These initiatives do not change the priority or category of a 999 call, but they help to ensure that a patient with a life-threatening emergency can begin to receive the required care as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend rightly raised staffing. I understand that the clinical vacancy rate at the trust is currently 7.7%. The trust has undertaken a very successful graduate recruitment campaign, which has resulted in 130 graduates accepting offers to join it. They are expected to start in September, including 31 who will start in the west division, which covers Devon.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

UK Elections: Abuse and Intimidation

[DAVID HANSON *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I should start by saying that since the election the Conservative Whips Office has been dealing with at least three credible threats to colleagues every week, including death threats, criminal damage, sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and general thuggishness around and after the election. For all I know, other parties' Whips Offices may be having similar experiences, and I look forward to hearing cross-party contributions on that score. It is for that reason, and a few others, that I thought it was appropriate to call this debate now.

When I first entered the House seven years ago, it never crossed my mind for one minute that I would end up making a speech like this. As far as I was concerned, elections were four or five weeks of robust banter followed by a shake of the hand and a pint in the pub, yet now it all seems so different, with swastikas on election boards and offensive slogans and language on posters.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I have been an MP for just over two years, and I cannot remember a single day that has gone by without me receiving some sort of abuse, whether that is death threats or a picture of me mocked up as a used sanitary towel and various other things. The last election was the most brutal I can imagine. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to look at this issue with a non-partisan view and accept that in all our parties, as much as it hurts us, there are people who do not represent our values? For some to suggest that it is only one party doing it is wrong.

Simon Hart: I absolutely recognise that point, and I will come to it later in my speech. There will be individual contributions from Members who might have had particular experiences that defy that challenge, but I agree with the hon. Lady, and I am grateful to her for making that point so early in proceedings.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech, and I congratulate him on securing the debate. While I understand why he has brought forward a debate with particular regard to general elections, does he not agree with me that the recent research done by BBC Radio 5 Live—it found that half of British female MPs have been threatened with physical abuse, nine out of 10 have been abused online and 80% have been verbally abused—shows that the issue is not restricted to election time?

Simon Hart: I thank my right hon. Friend for her timely contribution. One thing that has struck me—I know it has struck people in our Whips Office, too—is that when I started uncovering this topic, I found out

about stuff that I simply did not think existed. I have been astonished by the quantity of evidence I have received from all sides. As she said, I had assumed that the issue might just be around election times, when we are perhaps a higher profile community, but it is not. Actually, it seems to be going on all the time, and a number of colleagues are suffering in silence. I hope that they do not have to suffer in silence.

I mentioned swastikas on election boards, offensive slogans and language on posters, but there have also been scratched cars, broken windows and posters of the bleeding heads of some of our political leaders on stakes at marches and demos. There has even been the occasional police officer or teacher joining the overall fray. That is not the rule, but it is occasionally the exception.

Retailers and hoteliers have felt that they cannot support a candidate publicly or make a donation to the party or candidate of their choice, because they are worried that they might be attacked on online review sites or, even worse, in person. There are elderly voters who will not put up a sign in their windows. There are volunteers who worry about handing out leaflets and having abuse hurled at them. There are colleagues whose sexuality or religion has resulted in them being spat at—not once, but regularly. We will hear more on that later in the debate. These people form the core of democracy and our election effort, yet they are being steadily put off getting involved in politics at a time when their contribution has never been more important.

Of course, the abuse is online, too, and we will probably spend quite a bit of the debate talking about that. For Government Members—I am sure it is similar for colleagues in other parties—#toryscum is a regular feature of our lives, and that is just the bit I can repeat in the Chamber. I chose my words carefully. I do not know how many colleagues have read the report from BCS—the Chartered Institute for IT—and Demos. It contained a survey showing that over a three-month period MPs received 188,000 abusive tweets. That is one in 20 tweets received by MPs.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that legislation already exists to protect those who are abused online, but that legislation is often ignored or not enforced. Will he join me in putting pressure on the Government to launch a review to see why that is the case?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady is psychic, among many other things. What she said was going to be my next comment. I absolutely agree with her. There is another element with the existing laws, which is how few people know that they exist. Indeed, some law enforcement agencies do not know that they exist. The questions I will be putting to the Minister in a few minutes are partly intended to get a greater understanding of what legislation is there, where the gaps are and what we can do to fill them.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My hon. Friend might be aware of the Home Affairs Committee's report from last year that looked at the online abuse MPs have to suffer. There was an issue about the threshold we have to endure as Members of Parliament, which is different from that of members of the public. If abuse is

persistent and falls over into real-life activities, surely social media companies have to be held accountable, too.

Simon Hart: I am sure that a number of colleagues would agree with that contribution; I certainly do. I will be coming to some proposals and thoughts on social media in just a moment.

I want to take a moment to describe the example of our former colleague Byron Davies, who until recently was the MP for Gower. During the election campaign he was subjected to a sustained attack on Twitter that contained absolutely unfounded allegations about a criminal investigation for electoral fraud. That was not an embellishment or exaggeration of a story; it was simply made up. Whether Members supported him or not, he was a colleague defending a majority of 27, and he had to do that against a constant drip-feed on social media of people simply making things up as they went along. Could it have contributed to the loss of his seat? I do not know. It was certainly blatant defamation—that much we do know. The Electoral Commission could not help, social media platforms would not help, and the police investigation, like all police investigations, will take time. It is grinding slowly on, but our former colleague Mr Davies is having to do all that himself, and he is bearing the cost. When that inquiry eventually reaches its conclusion, what remedy will he really have?

I could mention my hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and the many others who have suffered similar or vaguely intimidatory experiences during the election campaign. Almost more worrying than that is the number of colleagues I have spoken to in the past few days who do not even want to come to this Chamber to make a contribution, lest it compound the intimidation and abuse they have been receiving in recent weeks. I hope that we are all in a sense making our contributions not to ease our bruised egos, but on behalf of colleagues who have put up with a lot of this nonsense over quite a long time, and are looking, as the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said, for a lead from the Government.

Having said all that, I want to make the point that this debate is not about thin-skinned politicians having had a bit of a bruising time and feeling rather sorry for ourselves. Nor is it, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) mentioned, about left versus right or right versus left, or whatever it might be—the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) made an interesting contribution on that particular score in her speech to the Fabian Society at the weekend. It is actually about families, staff, helpers and volunteers. For those of us who have teenage children who might follow us on Twitter and Facebook, it is about being able to say to them, “Don’t worry about the death threat; don’t worry about the abuse and the false accusations.” It is also for them that we speak.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I have had death threats for a number of years—I now have panic buttons and a restraining order against somebody. What is different about what happened at this election—in

[Andrew Percy]

which I was subjected to anti-Semitic abuse, my staff were spat at and my boards and property were attacked—is that the abuse has been politically motivated. The elephant in the room is that it has been motivated by the language of some of our political leaders, when they accuse people of one political side of murder, and when they dehumanise them in the way that is happening at the moment. There is something more sinister to this. Yes, it affects left and right, but we have to deal with the issue of what is happening on our side of politics.

Simon Hart: One of my most important recommendations is about the role of political leadership and what political leaders need to do, rather than what they need to say.

I wanted to mention the example of our former colleague Charlotte Leslie in Bristol, whose parents became victims of abuse. Their entire oil heating supply was drained into their garden by somebody who had an objection to Charlotte's position on fracking—a slightly ironic way of dealing with an environmental consideration, but none the less one that caused enormous distress, as did the scratching of "Tory scum" into her elderly parents' car. That is not something that anybody in this House should condone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) has just pointed out, when it comes to leadership, it is exactly such an example that should trigger a robust response from everybody who has the benefit of a high profile in politics.

It is about religion, sexuality, social background—it is about people who might have been to public school and sound a bit posh. It is about anybody who might have a political leaning one way or the other, and who might be thinking of becoming a local councillor, or of a career at some future stage in some branch of politics, not even necessarily as an MP, an Assembly Member or a Member of the Scottish Parliament—whatever it might be. We have to ask ourselves: why would they want to take that step when they see what Members of this House have to put up with and, worse still, what Members' families, friends, relations, campaigners and donors also have to subject themselves to?

To the social media platforms, to the left, to the right, and to groups such as Momentum, which has been mentioned, rather than taking the lazy way out and saying that they are responsible for this, I say, "Help us. If you are on the left, help us. If you are on the right, help us. If you are a social media platform, help us. Help us identify what has triggered the increase in abuse, the smear campaigns, the intimidation, the harassment, the thuggish behaviour on and offline, and the general criticism of people simply because of an inability to match or contest their arguments."

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is quite right: this behaviour is reprehensible. He is right to identify social media. Does he also think that the traditional print media, particularly newspapers such as *The Sun*, has had a role in creating a climate in which it is okay to abuse politicians? Perhaps we need to look at the traditional print media as well.

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Of course, print media is governed by a rather different and more visible level of regulation. There is a

line between robust challenge, the cut and thrust of politics and the sort of stuff that we know we are letting ourselves in for when we take on this job—some papers would argue that they are on the right side of that line—which is a mile away from the stuff we are talking about. People being made to feel a little shamefaced or guilty because they have cocked up—if I can use that expression—their particular contribution to politics is one thing. If there is an example of a newspaper inciting racial hatred, anti-Semitism and that sort of thing, the regulators ought to be looking at that, without impinging on the free press.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is making a strong case. I am a little concerned that this debate might blur the lines between criticism of the performance of a Member of Parliament or a stance they take and actual abuse. My concern is that the abuse particularly stops women entering politics. I will give the example of a candidate who stood in Ealing and was unfortunately not elected. Candidates have to declare their addresses when they stand for Parliament. She said that she started becoming nervous during the election campaign when opponents started standing outside her door, spitting in her face and following her. That is the threatening behaviour that she wants to highlight. This is not about criticism in the press.

Simon Hart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that contribution. Legislation of course already exists to deal with such incidents but, as we touched on before, it is not always easily accessible. It is not always entirely advantageous to be distracted by that during an election campaign.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I have been sparring partners on many occasions, but on this one I congratulate him on raising this issue. I agree that all it takes for evil to prosper is for good people to do nothing. On the other hand, it is very easy for us in this place to make the case and put the arguments down—we are protected by privilege and have the means of putting our views on the record—but there are councillors and ordinary people out there volunteering for political parties and charities up and down the country who are not protected in anything like the same way as we are in Parliament.

Simon Hart: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that contribution, which touches on the reason we are here: the degree of collateral impact from which we may fairly visibly suffer, and the knock-on effect on people who want to do good things for their community, charity or cause, but who are beginning to ask themselves whether it is worth the effort. What plans do the Government have to assess the extent of the issue, because I do not think that any of us here know what it is?

It almost seems that the age of reasoned argument in elections is under threat. All of us, in our own particular way, have experienced situations in which we mention immigration and are instantly labelled a racist, or we mention welfare and are instantly labelled as having some extraordinary dislike of the disabled, or we want to talk about complicated and sensitive issues around the economy, which is interpreted as simply wanting to starve the poor. Absurd, extreme, ridiculous, lazy and

trite comments are assigned to Members who simply want to tackle a complicated social problem in the way we were sent here to do. The fact that there is no room for reasoned argument any more is a cause of this debate. It seems that it is not really about winning votes or arguments anymore.

The manner in which some of those campaigns are conducted—I am obviously trying to steer a careful, non-partisan line here—is about driving people out of politics altogether. It is not about votes and arguments; it is about the single-minded determination to do away with anybody who happens to hold a contrary view. That is a big difference between 2015 and 2017, and it is an unattractive development that will simply reduce the gene pool from which we recruit our politicians and volunteers. I cannot believe that any member of the public, however vociferous they might be online, actually thinks that reducing the number of people from which we choose our representatives is a good thing.

What is all this doing to society? How is it impacting on candidate recruitment? What is it doing to the retention of good people in the House? Have we reviewed the recommendations that the Law Commission made 18 months ago? I am hopeful that the Minister has views on that. Are we doing enough to bring the existing provisions to the knowledge of the enforcement agencies and, indeed, to candidates? I hope that when the Minister gets to his feet in a few minutes he will be able to give us some indication of the Government's view on an independent assessment of the extent of the problem—what is going on out there, what is the cause and what is the remedy.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Four years ago the all-party parliamentary group against anti-Semitism produced a detailed set of recommendations on an all-party basis about conduct in elections and asked every political leader to endorse it. To date, none has. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the political leaders themselves drew up a code of conduct and a way of addressing behaviour during elections, that would go a considerable way towards dealing with the most difficult period? If there is a transgression by a candidate or their supporters, they face the issue of votes at that time, and therefore there is a tendency to try to dampen it down or ignore it during elections. That is precisely why we produced that report.

Simon Hart: I could not have put it better myself. In fact, I would expand it to outside election times, too. As we have heard today, this problem is not limited to that four or five-week period every three or four years.

My second question to the Minister is about reviewing existing laws and seeing which work and which should work but are not being enforced. Where there are gaps, we should recommend how to fill them. Then, as the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) said, we should ensure that there is cross-party support for legislation to achieve that aim.

We need to look at the responsibilities of the social media platforms, which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and I discovered not long ago, all too often wring their hands and say, "It's all too difficult." Actually, it is not all too difficult. It is all too important that they now adopt the same responsible attitude to what they publish in their name—

although they deny they are publishers—which is, on occasion, the sort of material that is completely unacceptable. Earlier I raised the example of Byron Davies and the Gower, who asked a social media platform—I think it was Twitter—to remove an outright lie that was possibly going to affect the outcome of the election. It refused and said that what was going on was within the guidelines. It cannot be with the guidelines simply to sit back and allow people to publish utter nonsense with the aim of artificially disrupting the outcome of an election. I suspect that everybody in this Chamber is of that view.

When the then Minister responded to a debate on online bullying last year, he said:

"There needs to be partnership, and I do not rule out regulation...We need to work with the companies, and we need clear guidelines on, and definitions of, online abuse. Even more importantly, we need very quick reactions, so that all of us as constituency MPs do not have to sit in surgeries with people who are clearly utterly distressed because of online material".—[Official Report, 7 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 1107.]

That applies just as much to electoral behaviour as to behaviour outside that time.

Finally—thank you for your patience, Mr Hanson—we need a political lead, as other colleagues have said. That means that the leaders of all parties and groups need to stand up and not just send out warmly worded tweets about bad behaviour or transmit mealy-mouthed messages of condemnation, but take a "not in my name" approach. All of the groups we have talked about overtly and by insinuation need to say, "Not in my name. Nobody who is a member of this party or this group should engage in online or offline abuse, either during an election or at any other time." The leadership of those organisations have the opportunity today to stand up and say that they will deal with this robustly. If they do not, they are complicit in the problem. That is why there have been rumours and this whole thing has gathered momentum—with a small "m"—over the past few months and years.

Thirteen months ago our colleague Jo Cox paid the ultimate price for this kind of stuff. It shook the nation and sent a message that I hoped people would listen to, whether they are in a position of political leadership or just able to vote at elections. One year on, the problem seems every bit as bad as it was back then. Unless we have joined-up, co-operative leadership from the Government—I hope we will hear about that now—and from all the Opposition parties and the groups that support them, all of the extraordinary work that has been done in Jo Cox's memory will have been wasted.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesperson for the Scottish National party at 5.10 pm, so there is very limited time for right hon. and hon. Members' contributions. I hope that Members bear in mind that I will not be able to get everybody in.

4.55 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): This is a very important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing it. We have to be clear that we are talking not about robust debate,

[*Ms Diane Abbott*]

however robust it is, but about mindless abuse. In my case, the mindless abuse has been characteristically racist and sexist. I have had death threats, and people tweeting that I should be hanged

“if they could find a tree big enough to take the fat bitch’s weight”.

There was an English Defence League-affiliated Twitter account—#burnDianeAbbot. I have had rape threats, and been described as a

“Pathetic useless fat black piece of shit”, an “ugly, fat black bitch”, and a “nigger”—over and over again. One of my members of staff said that the most surprising thing about coming to work for me is how often she has to read the word “nigger”. It comes in through emails, Twitter and Facebook.

Where I disagree with the hon. Gentleman is that he seems to suggest that this is all a relatively recent occurrence in this election. That is not my experience. It is certainly true that the online abuse that I and others experience has got worse in recent years, and that it gets worse at election time, but I do not put it down to a particular election. I think the rise in the use of online media has turbocharged abuse. Thirty years ago, when I first became an MP, if someone wanted to attack an MP, they had to write a letter—usually in green ink—put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it and walk to the post box. Now, they press a button and we read vile abuse that, 30 years ago, people would have been frightened even to write down.

I accept that male politicians get abuse, too, but I hope the one thing we can agree on in this Chamber is that it is much worse for women. As well as the rise of online media, it is helped by anonymity. People would not come up to me and attack me for being a nigger in public, but they do it online. It is not once a week or during an election; it is every day. My staff switch on the computer and go on to Facebook and Twitter, and they see this stuff.

Andrew Percy: I agree with everything the right hon. Lady is saying, but I do not think my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) was saying that this is a new thing. We have all had it for years on social media, and the right hon. Lady has had it in a particularly terrible way. What is different now is that some of this is being driven by political leaders’ language. When someone addresses a rally where there are posters of the severed head of the Prime Minister and they do not do anything about it, and when leaders say “ditch the bitch” in relation to the Prime Minister, that is the problem we have at the moment: it is the dehumanisation of each other in politics.

Ms Abbott: We will have to agree to disagree.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I am afraid I cannot give way, because I am mindful of the time.

The type of racist and sexist abuse I get is not tied to any events in this particular election campaign. This is not about just politicians or even women politicians. Any woman who goes into the public space can expect

that type of abuse. People will remember how Mary Beard, the historian, received horrible abuse online because she was on “Question Time”.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, but I am conscious that we have only 11 minutes to get other Members in, so I hope she will draw her remarks to a conclusion.

Ms Abbott: In closing, I want to make a couple of points, the first of which is that there is a relationship between online abuse and mainstream media commentary; in my office, we always see, at the very least, a spike in abuse after there has been a lot of negative stuff in the media. Online abuse and abuse generally are not the preserve of any one party or any one party faction, and to pretend that is to devalue a very important argument. I am glad we have had the debate—it gives me no pleasure to talk about my experience not only in the last election, but for years—but let us get this debate straight: it is not about a particular party or a particular faction, but about the degradation of public discourse online.

5 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this debate.

I have stood in six general elections and I can say that, frankly, this was by a long chalk the most unpleasant one in which I have ever participated. I have no doubt at all that much of the behaviour that my hon. Friend outlined was co-ordinated, because the patterns of behaviour that I witnessed in my constituency have been repeated across the country and have been reported to me by a number of colleagues.

One issue that I want to raise, to echo what the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, is that of social media. Frankly, if ever there were a misnomer, “social media” is it; it is deeply antisocial media. Twitter, in particular, has a lot to answer for. The anonymity in which a lot of participants on Twitter clothe themselves encourages the sort of behaviour that we have heard about today. Logging on to Twitter nowadays is much like wading through sewage; it is a deeply unpleasant experience. The sort of commentary, abuse and language that one sees on it, which is regularly used against everyone but in particular candidates for election, is the sort of thing that no one would dream of saying to another person face to face.

That is the nub of the issue. We now have this new phenomenon of social media and it has not been adequately addressed. It is certainly not being addressed by the social media companies. My hon. Friend is right: someone who makes a complaint to Twitter gets completely ignored. Twitter, in fact, has a huge amount to answer for, so in the brief time available to me I ask the Minister whether he will please give consideration to the impact that social media have had on the behaviour of many people during the election campaign. What proposals do the Government have to address that, because at the moment anarchic media are causing misery to untold numbers of people, not least colleagues here in this House?

5.2 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for securing this extremely important debate.

I am very sorry that we are having to have the debate, but it is necessary, and I have been appalled at the severity and scale of the abuse experienced by hon. Members and that has been described today. In our democracy, to be able to stand for Parliament free from abuse, threats, degradation and defamatory remarks is essential. I have always thought that we should encourage non-career politicians into politics—career politicians are also good, but we need the diversity—but it is difficult to encourage them into a world of negativity, put-downs, vilification and abuse, so Parliament will lose good people. All parties have such issues, and I reiterate that it is incumbent on party leaders to act where abuse occurs. We cannot ignore it, because ignoring abuse ultimately condones it.

In my own experience, I have had very personal attacks, including anti-Semitic comments because I have friends and family who are Jewish. I have also met constituents who have been told that I was not a real doctor, but masquerading as a doctor; that I did not live with my husband; and all sorts of false allegations, such as ones about business contracts that I was supposed to have with the NHS, but which I have never had. That was all aimed at undermining my personal and professional credibility.

I will end now to give others the opportunity to contribute. Where abuse occurs, it is incumbent on candidates, parties and party leaders to act; such abuse does not benefit politics, society or diversity. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I hope that we have cross-party consensus on the issue.

5.4 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I will try to be brief, and I have already made a couple of interventions.

I am a Tory in Humberside, which is not an easy place to be a Tory. I was a councillor for 10 years—one of two Tories on Hull City Council—and have been through four council elections and four general elections. I am not afraid of abuse and insults, something I am pretty used to, but what is happening now is on a different scale.

I have been called “Tory scum” for years and had insults in the streets, and I am pretty used to that. It is part of the process, and although we might say that it should not happen, it does. What happened at this election, however, was different. I never thought that in my own constituency someone would come up to me and shout the name of the Leader of the Opposition, then describe me as, “Israeli and Zionist scum.” I never thought that my posters would be ripped down and posted on social media under the phrase, “Fuck the Tories #CorbynIn”. I never thought that my staff would be spat at in the street by activists, by people naming the Leader of the Opposition as their motivation for calling my staff “Tory fucking scum.” That is what is happening in our democracy.

It is true that there is abuse on all sides, on the left and on the right. I condemn it absolutely. What is different about what is happening now is that there is an

assault on our democracy and on one particular political party. This dehumanisation of my side of politics is being motivated and encouraged by the language of some of the leaders of the Labour party. There are very decent Labour members—the vast mass of them—and Members of Parliament, but the abuse has been happening to some of them as well.

To have leaders addressing rallies where there were images of the severed head of the Prime Minister, but that not being called out, and to have leaders accusing people of murder or saying, “Ditch the bitch!”, but that not being called out, is an assault on our democratic values and our processes. It has to stop. It is the worst I have encountered in any election and it is not acceptable. In this particular regard, it is coming from one particular faction. We should be honest about that.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Luke Pollard and Rehman Chishti have literally three minutes between them. Luke Pollard, you have a minute and a half, maximum.

5.7 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Abuse aimed at candidates and volunteers is not endured by only one party; it is endured by all parties. There are people right across our political spectrum, from left to right and in the middle, who suffer needless abuse for trying to make the world a better place. Politics is our way of doing that. It is a difficult and contested environment, and at elections we want our debates to be robust but, speaking as a gay man and as a proud Janner from Plymouth, I want to speak up not only for Members of Parliament, but for the volunteers and for those cautious about getting involved in politics for the first time.

During the election, I spoke to a young LGBT person who said, “I get abuse online; I am scared to go online. If Members of Parliament aren't getting justice for the abuse they get, what chance do I have?” The message that this House and the Government must send to young people from the LGBT community and every community who want to make the world a better place is that abuse will be taken seriously, wherever it comes from, whoever says it and whatever form it is done in, whether that is in the mainstream print media, slipped into broadcast, on social media or as abuse on posters, or—this happened to Jemima, one of the people I represent in Plymouth—in an anonymous note put through her door simply because she had put up a Labour poster. We have to send the message that abuse, wherever it comes from, is not acceptable.

5.8 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing the debate.

I have colleagues in all parts of the House. In my seven years here, I have built some wonderful friendships with them and gone on some wonderful trips abroad on delegations and on work we have carried out together. However, I will never accept something that is unacceptable to happen to any Member of Parliament from any political party. Let me give two examples.

[Rehman Chishti]

When I stood up to make my acceptance speech and to thank all the electorate after a very difficult election—the culture in the election campaign was one of the most difficult that I have experienced—I had an activist say in public, “Fuck off back to country X”. The matter has been referred to the Kent police. They are investigating it under public order and racism, so let them do their job. But a Labour party activist, who happens to be a former assistant to the Medway Labour group, said that in public as I made my acceptance speech. I ask each and every Member here: if you experienced that, how would you feel?

Two days before the election, a video went online of a conversation between a third party and a Labour councillor, who happens to be the former chairman of the Gillingham and Rainham association. Malicious, grossly offensive remarks and a threat to me were made—

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman, but I have to call the Front Benchers, so will he resume his seat? I call Tommy Sheppard.

5.10 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I appreciate that we are short of time and I know that we will discuss this issue again in the main Chamber next week, so I will try to keep my remarks brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this important debate, and I associate my party with the sentiments that he expressed.

I and many of my colleagues have been subjected to exactly the type of activity that the hon. Gentleman described. Indeed, someone was recently convicted for making a threat against me. Like others, I am extremely concerned that it seems that the majority of the perpetrators of such abuse are male and the majority of the targets are female Members—or at least the greatest intensity of threats is directed towards them. That should be a cause for extreme concern for everyone.

We should be absolutely clear that we are not talking about a bit of political banter. We are not talking about the rough and tumble of political debate, or even about satirising or caricaturing another person’s point of view; we are talking about vile abuse—dehumanising people and sometimes inciting violence against them. That sort of activity should not be deemed acceptable in any democratic society.

We are also, I hope, not suggesting that there is anything special that needs to be protected about Members of Parliament; we are arguing about abuse that should be tackled no matter who in society suffers from it. In that sense, I agree with the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). This issue cannot be taken in isolation from general debates in society, or from the general portrayals in the media of certain people in society. I will not say exactly what the link is, but to say that there is not an association or a link would be extremely problematic.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tommy Sheppard: We are very short of time, but I will if the hon. Gentleman is quick.

Martin Whitfield: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with a senior Scottish National party politician that now is the time for people to sign up to a code of conduct, and now is the time to ban anonymous social media accounts?

Tommy Sheppard: Yes. I think the hon. Gentleman is talking about my colleague Alyn Smith MEP—a member of the SNP national executive—who called for that. I was going to deal with that point at the end of my remarks.

We need to consider the wider political factors at play and whether there is anything we can do to try to change the political discourse in our country through the way we operate politics. As elected Members of Parliament, we have a special responsibility to take a lead on that. There are undoubtedly a lot of people with a legitimate sense of grievance about the lot that they have received in society, for one reason or another. They feel alienated from the political process and unable to express their point of view.

Of course, that has always been the case; the difference is that, whereas those people had to go to extreme lengths to vent their anger before, it is now remarkably easy. All they need to do is switch on their phone and they can instantly and anonymously direct the most vile abuse to whomever they want. But that does not mean that we should not look at the underlying reasons for that alienation and disaffection and see whether there is stuff that we can do, through our education system or by improving political discourse generally, to try to minimise that. I do not say that to excuse people’s behaviour in any way; I am simply trying to find some explanation for it, so that we might begin the long-term process of trying to prevent it.

I caution colleagues very much against trying to make this a party political matter. Every Member of this House—albeit some much more than others—has been subjected to some sort of abuse. It crosses all political parties, and it is not a matter that one political party experiences more than any other. I understand that sometimes, people who offer such abuse identify themselves as a political opponent, or a supporter of a political opponent, of the person to whom the abuse is directed, but that does not mean that the abuse is sanctioned by a political party or that such people speak for a political party. Therefore, if we are to tackle this issue properly, we must do so on a cross-party basis, and we certainly could agree a voluntary code of conduct among the political parties that states what is acceptable and what is not.

5.15 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) for bringing this important debate to the House. It is clearly one in which every Member has some interest, because I doubt that any Member or anyone who stood for election to the House has not faced some level of abuse. I also thank the other Members who took part in the debate. I am keen to hear more detail about the examples they raised of abuse that was done in the name of my party, and I am happy to take up those cases.

I am aware that many Members did not take part in the debate because they do not want to give oxygen or attention to the people who abuse them. For the same reason, I do not want to go into the details of the abuse that I have received while I have been in the public eye over the past couple of years, but I stress that such abuse has no place in our democracy. If we are truly to be a country with free and fair elections, everyone must feel able to stand as a candidate, or to support a candidate or a political party, without fear.

A lot has been said about us as politicians, but I stress that this issue is also about people who purport to support a political party. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) told me that supporters of his who put “Vote Labour” posters in their windows were subjected to hate mail, which, owing to its content, is currently being investigated seriously by the police. That is alarming.

This is of course not just an issue for one political party; it happens across the political spectrum. I think that this issue was first brought before the House at the first Prime Minister’s Question Time of this Session, when the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) spoke about the abuse that she had received during the election. That, too, is abhorrent. This is an issue for all political parties.

Abuse is also an issue both during and outside election campaigns. While we serve as Members in this House, we are afforded some level of security. Since the murder of Jo Cox, the importance of that security has been brought very much to our attention. That incident reminds us how serious this issue can be. Online abuse does not happen in a vacuum; when someone can go online and tweet abuse or put up a Facebook message saying that they want to “put a bullet between his ears”—that is a comment that I reported to Facebook, which said it did not breach its terms and conditions—and get away with it, it gives them the confidence to do so offline, on the streets.

I am obviously very hurt when I am the victim of abuse, but I am hurt far more when members of my staff are abused in the street. Occasionally, they are even mistaken for me, which makes me feel terribly guilty. This issue is about the protection not just of politicians but of their families and colleagues.

Mrs Miller: I am sorry for interrupting the hon. Lady, but does she not think that the leadership of our parties must set the right tone? If they do not, people will follow that example. Surely she agrees.

Cat Smith: The right hon. Lady pre-empts the movement of my speech towards exactly that point. It is important that political parties and political leaders have a way in which they can address this issue. The Labour party has a social media policy and a code of conduct, which we expect our members to abide by. Where we find examples of members not doing so, we do not hesitate to remove them as members. When they join the party, our members pledge that they will not use any form of abuse; if they do, they risk losing their membership. In fact, in 2016, the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), tweeted to say that such abuse was not acceptable, and he reiterated that in the “Question Time” debates during the general election campaign.

Simon Hart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Cat Smith: I cannot—I am really short of time.

I want to stress the responsibility for social media as well. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said on “Daily Politics” yesterday, it is not right that Facebook can remove a picture of a woman breastfeeding within minutes, but it takes it two weeks to remove a fake social media profile.

I see you urging me to draw my remarks to a close, Mr Hanson.

Simon Hart rose—

Cat Smith: I therefore urge the Minister to work on a cross-party basis. We would like to see a code of conduct by way of which we can work together to ensure that this abuse is not accepted.

David Hanson (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) will get a chance to wind up at the end for one minute.

Simon Hart: I’m already wound up! [*Laughter.*]

David Hanson (in the Chair): I call Chris Skidmore.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) on securing this important debate. I welcome the opportunity to address some of the issues that he and other hon. Members from both sides of the House have raised. My hon. Friend put his points across in powerful terms, as have others today, and this is clearly an extremely serious matter that Members feel strongly about. As he said in his opening remarks, this is not just about ourselves as Members of Parliament; it is about all those close to us—our family, our friends and our supporters.

The Prime Minister has been very clear that there is no place in our democracy for the harassment of parliamentary candidates and that abuse will not be tolerated. That is why today she has asked the non-partisan Committee on Standards in Public Life to carry out a review of the intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates, including those who stood to become Members of Parliament at the 2017 general election. The review will gather evidence of harassment and consider what action needs to be taken to ensure the integrity of the future of our democratic process.

This is clearly an issue that has the potential to impact on people’s wish to stand for office and therefore has a negative impact on standards in public life more broadly. It is also about protecting the integrity of public service itself and that of the offices that we hold. The independent, non-partisan Committee on Standards in Public Life is well respected and, I believe, well placed to lead that work. It has conducted many detailed reviews on conduct and ethics and operates independently from Government, regulators and politicians.

Rehman Chishti: The Minister refers to responsibility in relation to conduct. Does he therefore agree with my earlier point that if a third party makes to someone in office a threat of violence directed towards another

[*Rehman Chishti*]

person running for office—myself in this case—and makes points that are grossly offensive, anti-Semitic and homophobic, the individual to whom that is reported has a responsibility to notify the authorities? To do nothing, as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, is completely unacceptable.

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree that we, like all legislators, cannot be silent on this issue. I hope that, as the committee begins to set up its review, all Members will wish to partake some of the evidence they have given today and do so confidentially, without risk of somehow glorifying the perpetrators. It will be for the committee to determine the exact parameters of the review, but we anticipate that it will want to examine the nature of the problem and the protections and measures currently in place, and whether those need to change.

The committee may also consider the broader implication of other office holders—the role of councillors was mentioned. Foremost, the review will look at intimidation experienced by anyone who has stood as a parliamentary candidate. I am sure the committee will want to progress that work as quickly as possible. It will produce a report for the Prime Minister with specific recommendations for actions, and we look forward to its findings.

On the issue of abuse and the current parameters of legislation, as was pointed out legislation is in place to deal with internet trolls, cyber-stalking and harassment and with perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. As a Government, we are making changes where necessary to ensure that the legislation we have is as effective as possible. For example, in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 we made changes to relevant offences to help ensure that people who commit them are prosecuted and properly punished.

The 2015 Act amended section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988, which makes it an offence to send certain articles with intent to cause distress or anxiety. The amendment allows prosecutions to be dealt with in either the magistrates court or the Crown court, with the maximum penalty in the magistrates court for the offence being 12 months' imprisonment and two years in the Crown court. The amendment also removed the previous requirement that prosecution be brought within six months, extending the time within which prosecutions for offences under section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 can be made to up to three years after the offence. As has been said, the key point is that legislation is in place; it is a question of communicating the fact that our legislation now needs to be used by the police when offences are committed and claims and accusations about those offences are brought to them.

The law is clear that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. Robust legislation is in place to deal with internet trolls, cyber-stalking and harassment and the perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. Section 127 of the 2003 Act created an offence of sending or causing to be sent by means of a public electronic communications network

“a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character”.

The Crown Prosecution Service also recently revised its guidelines on social media to incorporate new and

emerging crimes being committed online and to provide clear advice, to help the prosecution of cyber-enabled crime.

The recently enacted Digital Economy Act 2017 will also help to ensure that online abuse is more effectively tackled by requiring a code of practice to be established. The code will set out guidance about what social media providers should do in relation to conduct on their platforms that involves bullying or insulting an individual or other behaviour likely to intimidate or humiliate them. The Government are considering how to take forward the social media code of practice as part of the newly established digital charter, and we will provide more details shortly about when the consultation with social media will take place.

Hate crime of any kind, directed against any community or any person, has absolutely no place in our society; I am sure we all agree on that. As a Government, we are utterly committed to tackling hate crime. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that hate crime of any kind is completely unacceptable. It divides communities, destroys lives and makes us weaker. Britain is thriving precisely because we welcome people from all backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities, and that is something we must strive to protect.

The fact that one of the first actions the Home Secretary took in her new role last summer was to launch the hate crime action plan shows how important tackling hate crime is for the Government. The Home Secretary has also asked Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary to carry out an inspection of all five monitored strands of hate crime, to build up a national picture of how effectively and efficiently police forces are dealing with it. The inspection will take place during 2017-18, and the Government will be keen to see the findings and then consider how they should be taken forward.

The Government are determined that no candidate—regardless of their party, background, race, ethnicity or sexuality—should be forced to tolerate abuse, online or offline, whether it is physical abuse or the threat of violence or intimidation. It is utterly unacceptable in our modern democracy, which we believe is an inclusive and tolerant one, for the incidents of abuse discussed today to be allowed to go on unchallenged. I met the Law Commission this week and the Electoral Commission last week to raise the issue of candidate abuse. I look forward to the Committee on Standards in Public Life's review of intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates and the eventual conclusions of its report.

We, as Members of Parliament and as a Government, cannot be silent on this matter. The law exists to protect candidates, and I urge anyone who has evidence of abuse to present it to the committee as part of its review, to the Electoral Commission as part of its review of the general election and, above all, to their local police force, which must take this issue very seriously.

I thank Members on both sides for contributing to this important debate, which I hope will mark a turning point, not only assisting increased detection of intolerance and abuse in all forms, but marking a cultural shift, whereby we, across all parties, work together to stamp out these vile forms of abuse and tackle the fundamental point that this is not acceptable or permissible. We owe it to our democracy to make clear that intimidation and abuse have no part in our society, not only for candidates

who stood at the recent general election but for future generations of men and women who are considering entering public life and standing for election. No one must be deterred from playing their part in our democracy, which is why we must seek to end the corrosive effect that abuse and intimidation has of actively discouraging future generations from standing as our representatives.

5.29 pm

Simon Hart: Thank you very much, Mr Hanson, for your role this afternoon. I also thank colleagues from both sides of the House for such useful contributions and the Government for taking such immediate action on this. We even got a letter from the Prime Minister before the Minister had got to his feet, so things are working well.

I apologise for going on too long at the beginning, particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), who was making a really moving speech. I hope he will have an opportunity to complete those comments, perhaps in the other Chamber. If I had had a chance to intervene on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), I would have asked how many people the Labour party has already sanctioned for offences in this area. Perhaps she could write to me with that information.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered abuse and intimidation of candidates and the public in UK elections.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 July 2017

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Housing Supply

1.30 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the supply of homes and affordable homes to buy.

Home ownership has been people's preferred way of living and enjoying their home comforts for many years. All the surveys tell us that an overwhelming majority of UK people are either pleased to own their own home or would like to own their own home, and the reasons for that are obvious. Owning a home makes people free of landlords' special rules and regulations. They are free to do in their own home anything that they wish, subject only to the rules of decency and their conduct towards other people in their home and towards their neighbours. They are also free to amend, decorate and improve the inside of their home in more or less any way they see fit, subject to safety standards, while suitable improvements can be made to the outside, subject to planning consent.

For most people, home ownership has also turned out to be an extremely good investment. Not only does a home represent security for themselves and their family, and a place where they can create and enjoy their own environment; it is a store of growing value. Since 1980, house prices have risen by 7% a year on a fairly steady basis. There have been a few setbacks, most notably during periods of recession. The last severe setback was a 7.6% fall in 2009, on the back of the banking crash. However, that tells us something very interesting: even when shares and the values of banks were crashing dramatically, the average home did not fall in value much against the background of the average steady 7% growth. It is therefore not surprising that 86% of our fellow citizens want to own their own home; it is perhaps more surprising that fewer and fewer currently achieve that goal.

Home ownership reached its peak as people's preferred form of tenure at 71% in 2003. Since then, there has been a sharp decline. Now, only 64% of our fellow citizens own their own home, according to the official figures. I submit that those figures overstate the reality. Because of the way the figures are calculated, if an adult with a job still lives at home with their parents, they do not count as a separate household. They are not in a rented household, so they are invisible in the totals, even though they are, to all intents and purposes, in a rented household under somebody else's rules, although they may not pay any rent to their generous parents.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point. To illustrate it, I asked the Library for the home ownership figure for Ealing Central and Acton. Apparently it is 46%, not 64%. Does he accept that there is a bigger imbalance in London, and that things are worse than the global figures he is quoting? Apparently, the average price a first-time buyer pays in the London Borough of

Ealing is £490,421, on an average salary of £27,000. Does he accept that the inflated house prices in London are part of the problem?

John Redwood: I very much agree, and I will go on to look at how we deal with that, at the Government's answer and at what more can be done. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the figures exaggerate the homeowner percentage. Given the way the figures are calculated, if a group of young adults co-rent and share a property, for example, that does not appear as a series of independent rented households, but as one rented property. The figures therefore underestimate the number of people living in the rented model compared with those living in the owner-occupied model, because it is measured by housing units rather than individual households. The Government should bear it in mind that we are probably dealing with more people whose aspirations are not being fulfilled, rather than fewer, because the overall 64% figure undoubtedly overstates the reality.

We all know from our own experiences that many under-35s not only cannot afford to own a home, but find it extremely difficult to afford a rented home in London and the south-east because rents are extraordinarily high. They may still live with their parents, but it would not be their preferred way of proceeding; it may not be their parents' preferred answer either, but family loyalty and love come before individual preferences, given the financial positions people find themselves in.

That decline in official home ownership—from 71% to 64%—is more pronounced when looking at the age-related figures. According to the official figures, 54% of under-34s owned their own house or flat in 1996, but that fell to just 34% by 2016. We have gone from a majority of the under-34s being able to afford their own home—so we know it can be done—to a minority of around a third in the more recent figures.

For most people, the financial case for owning is extremely strong. By definition, at the moment it may be cheaper to buy a house and pay a mortgage at very low interest rates than to pay rent, because rents are so high. Looking at it over a lifetime, it is obviously much cheaper and better to make the effort and buy a house, if people can, because they may have only 25 years of paying the mortgage, whereas they may have 50 or 60 years of paying rent, which will cost an awful lot more. Rent is a good way to keep people poor.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): To give the right hon. Gentleman a picture, in my office in Portcullis House, I have Ross, who bought his own home and pays a mortgage of £600 a month, and Dan, who pays £650 a month to rent a room in a flat. For the first it is an investment; for the second it is an impediment to ever owning his own home.

John Redwood: That is a very powerful individual illustration that bears out my general point that maybe half of people today would be no worse off month by month if they were able to get a deposit and buy a property, compared with renting. If we look forward 30, 40 or 50 years, they should be massively better off, if for no other reason than that the mortgage stops once it has been repaid, whereas rent carries on.

Worse still is the cruelty of renting for those in old age, when the rent will be at its maximum, because rents are likely to carry on inflating as they have done in

[John Redwood]

recent years. Not only is rent paid for many more years, but people are charged the maximum rent when they are deep into retirement and least able to pay it, and when they will worry about how far their pension will stretch to meet their daily bills. That leaves out of account the possibility that, if someone buys a property, its value will go up, which is an added bonus. As I pointed out, that has been true since 1980. It might not always be true, but if it were true again over 25 years, the owner would be the double winner: they pay less by purchasing rather than renting, and their asset rises in value.

That rise in value gives homeowners more freedoms. If they buy early enough in life, that asset is there, normally rising in value, as possible collateral if they want to raise a loan for some other purpose—to help their family set up a business or whatever it may be—but it is not there for the person in rented accommodation. It is undoubtedly true that a person who manages to buy a property is, rightly or wrongly, usually treated as a better proposition for loans and business activities, which is another injustice for the person continuously paying rent.

I detect some cross-party agreement, which is excellent, that home ownership is the preferred form of tenure for many people—for very good reason—and that we need to make more efforts to get people into it, to deal with their high rental costs.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the other advantage of owner-occupation is security? In the private rented sector, where an increasing number of families with children are living, a landlord simply needs to secure a possession order for eviction. That has become the main route for the eviction of families, leading to children being insecure and living in temporary accommodation, far away from their homes and schools, with all the consequences that holds for public services.

John Redwood: I entirely agree, and I mentioned security for families at the beginning. That is a point well made.

We need to ask what we can do. House prices in many parts of the country, most especially in London and the south-east, are extremely high, and it is very difficult even for someone on average earnings, let alone below-average earnings, to raise a sufficiently large deposit, meet the requirements to raise the loan and meet the interest payments on it. One driver of these very high house prices is undoubtedly the big imbalance between demand and supply in housing. I know the Government accept that and are trying to work on the supply side. If more houses can be produced, all other things being equal, that should help ease the house price pressures.

There is also the question of demand. I think all of us wish to be generous to refugees and to invite in people of talent who can make a good contribution to our community. There is everything to be said for allowing companies investing here to bring in their executives and so forth, but Government Members feel there has to be some control on overall numbers. When we are being generous, as we should be, we have to take into account the strains being put on the housing market, which may mean that the people coming here cannot

get the quality and price of housing that we would regard as important for the lifestyles we wish for all the people in our country.

We need to look at the number of people who need housing vis-à-vis migration, as well as supply. I know the Government are considering that and will be freer on it in due course, once we come to debate in the House of Commons a UK migration policy that meets demands for decency and labour mobility for business, but that also understands the stresses placed on housing and other services if we have very large numbers. Those stresses run the risk of us not being able to offer people the standards we think are appropriate for anyone settled here in our country.

The Government have attempted to tackle the housing problem by driving the construction of more homes and to tackle the issue of affordability by working particularly with first-time buyers on how to get the first deposit and raise sufficient money to buy what are expensive properties. I welcome the Government's initiatives. They are all well-intended, and some have been doing good things. My main purpose today is to raise two questions. Can the initiatives that already exist be beefed up and better advertised, so that we get more people to use them? It is still slower than we would like. Secondly, are there new initiatives we should add to them, given the general imperative to get on with solving the housing scarcity problem in general and the shortage of affordable housing to buy in particular?

Through the help to buy ISA, the Government are offering a £3,000 top-up to someone who can save £12,000 for a deposit on a house. Although £15,000 is a lot of money for someone on a low income who is trying to save, it is not a lot of money for a house deposit. I wonder whether, through the Minister, the Chancellor might think a little more about those figures. The more help that can be offered, the faster someone can get a deposit and the better that is for their ability to access the housing market.

The Help to Buy equity loan scheme is admirable, but it is limited to new homes only, and I wonder why. Most people buy a second-hand home. By definition, the stock of those homes is massively bigger than the new supply in any given year. I know it would be a lot more expensive if we opened up the scheme to a wider range of houses, but it would also be a lot more useful, because many people buy a second-hand home as their first home. Indeed, for some, the pleasure of buying a first home is in buying a second-hand home that is not in great shape, so that they can put their stamp on it. It may be a way to have a more affordable home, because they may wish to spend their own time and effort on improving the house, rather than spending money to get others in to improve it for them. It might be worth looking at whether we can provide more of a bridge for people who want to buy second-hand homes.

The affordable housing fund was set up to generate more construction of affordable housing. Again, that is a great initiative. I would like the Minister to give us more up-to-date information on how many homes that scheme might achieve and what the approved build rate under it is. One issue with the affordable housing fund is the cost of building the properties and the quality of their construction. I am all in favour of really good-quality construction, and modern homes are built to a much higher standard in many ways than older homes. However,

one way to match the need for higher quality and affordable cost may well be to build on the initiatives of the house building industry, by having more construction in the factory before things are brought to site. None of us wish to recreate the old prefabs. They were a necessary and welcome development in the immediate post-war crisis, when so much of our cities had been devastated by bombing, but they are not the kind of thing we want to build today. People want elegant, well-insulated homes that meet all modern standards.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman talks about prefabs and the old style. In my constituency the Peabody housing trust developed as a millennium product pre-built buildings on Murray Grove. People are still living there now, and very happily so. There is a modern way of developing that could be cheaper. Does he think the Government should consider that?

John Redwood: I agree. There is not a public-private sector divide, in my view; it is something the private sector is beginning to adopt and needs to look at just as much as the public sector. If done well, it can improve the quality. Indeed, some of the most expensive properties that individuals can buy are modular German or Swedish houses, which are imported in kit form and put up in a week or two on a suitable piece of concrete, on a nice plot of land, at quite a high price, with extremely elegant finishes.

The reason we can both drive quality up and drive cost down is that in the factory environment we can engineer and produce the larger parts of the house to high specifications and low tolerances, so that they are very accurate. When the houses are then on site, they are in good order and we do not need all the site labour. We do not have problems when it rains, because it is all being done in a controlled environment, where dust and dirt can be controlled and there are not the wrong wet or dry conditions. We can have perfect conditions for manufacturing to a high quality. The more we can achieve in the factory, and the less we have to do on site, the more we speed up the build time. Months can be taken out of the build time, and if we take out time, we take out cost.

I hope that more can be done. Persimmon, for example, is producing very high-quality homes for private sector buyers. Its Space4 factory does quite a lot of prefabrication work for a number of homes in its range. I hope there will be more initiatives. I mention that to the Government because, through their affordable housing fund, they have the money and they are the customer, as well as the final customer for the property. They can therefore use that intelligently, as a buyer, to drive the process in the way I have suggested, so that we get quality up and cost down—a double benefit.

The Government have a rent to buy scheme. I would like to hear more about that and whether it can be made more generous. The idea is lower rent when someone takes on the tenancy, to give them more scope to save for a deposit. They then have the right to move in and switch from renting to buying. That is an excellent idea.

I think that the Government could do more on their own estate and on brownfields in general. That is partly a planning issue and partly an investment or encouragement

issue. By Government, I mean local as well as national, because the two need to work in partnership, which often requires national Government to lead the way. A large number of properties, particularly in our towns and cities, are in use but are in decline, or the buildings may be empty because their use has terminated. Given the pace of change in retail, there will be redundant retail space, and given the pace of change in office employment and some industrial employment, there will be redundant older buildings. Older warehouses and industrial plants have been elegantly converted into homes, for example in docklands. When those buildings are down on their luck or become free, we must ensure that the public sector does all it can to make permits and proposals available so that people can transform them.

Perhaps the Government could look at a scheme to back individuals who want to transform a property of their own—a sort of modern homesteading scheme for which they can be given support if they want to take on a poor property—or if a group of people want to take on a larger property and convert it. We could have more action to deal with dereliction, which is often close to valuable real estate in some of our leading cities, but we need to back that with an initiative. It should not always be large companies that eventually get around to doing that and taking all the property; there may be an opportunity for individuals, smaller businesses, co-operative arrangements or whatever to take on property problems and turn them into opportunities.

On brownfield sites and in urban redevelopment there is generally scope for central and local government to have a bigger vision—some are good at that, but some are rather slow—and to use it to identify suitable sites for more affordable housing for sale.

Dr Huq: There is another level in London—the Mayor of London. The right hon. Gentleman was asking for more up-to-date statistics. A press release today from the Mayor announced 50,000 new affordable homes, 1,823 of them in Ealing, with two thirds for first-time buyers and one third at social rent levels. I am curious to hear from the Minister whether the Government will also commit to social rents. On the whole, does the right hon. Gentleman welcome that breakdown, which might go towards counteracting the feeling of many young people that the housing ladder is being kicked away from them?

John Redwood: As I have said, I am pleased with any initiative that provides more affordable housing for sale. London is the centre of the crisis, because it has the most unaffordable housing for most people, but it has considerable scope for the sort of developments that I have been talking about, where there are brownfield areas or property that needs change of use or that can be extended or improved where suitable schemes could work.

I cannot sit down without mentioning my constituency, which has its own housing issues. I live in part of the country where quite a lot of people would like to buy a home. My council, Wokingham Borough Council—my constituency also includes parts of West Berkshire Council—feels that it has done more than its fair share by identifying large sites for new house building and our building rate in the constituency is almost 1,000 homes a year, which is a very fast pace of change to accept.

[John Redwood]

The council wants two things to make that a bit more tolerable. First, it wants reassurance from planning Ministers that the housing will be in places only where the council is making provision. It is making plenty of provision, but there is a temptation for inspectors to grant permission for houses not where the council is planning, so not with the road, school and health facilities that we would like.

Secondly, as the Minister will recognise, given the phenomenal pace of change, the council needs financial help to put in the infrastructure. It is no good getting the private sector to finance a lot of new homes if there is no extra primary school, doctors' surgery or, above all, more road space, because our roads are now totally congested. The local council had to put in three new primary schools in a hurry a couple of years ago when the numbers had built up and changed rather rapidly because the new people coming in to buy the new homes had rather more family members than had been anticipated when the first forecast was run. There is a real issue with maintaining a decent quality of service and finding the money for it.

When a council or area is co-operating, the Government, in turn, should co-operate with it and local people and provide infrastructure and some sort of order and pace to the development, because otherwise the pace of change becomes disruptive and difficult and turns people against the idea of more housing, which nationally we clearly need. There need to be fair shares.

I obviously welcome the Government's initiatives to promote more prosperity and development in the north, because that suits us as well. We have been carrying a lot of the brunt of development and growth. Growth and jobs are welcome in many ways, but they must be at a sensible pace. We on our side of the argument would like to see fairer shares across the country, just as much as many Members representing seats further away from London would like a bigger share of the growth that the country is capable of.

Perhaps a more contentious note is the right to buy. I am an enthusiast for the right to buy because it is a good way for people to acquire their own home, but I wonder whether the access arrangements are sufficient. Why do we limit access under the right to buy to post-1997 houses in some cases? Are the discounts large enough? I do not buy the argument that selling a socially provided house reduces the supply. The number of houses remains exactly the same after the transaction with the same people living in them as before it took place; it is just that the form of tenure of the one that is sold changes and there are all sorts of restrictions on resale to ensure that they are still properly used and the system is not exploited.

Under the system we are now developing, which I welcome, if a publicly owned house is sold and someone takes out a private sector mortgage, the state gets a receipt. I want that money spent on producing another house, so that right to buy can become an ally of more housing provision because the money can be recycled. That is what developers do: they undertake a development with their capital and then sell it on because they need the capital to do the same again and to build more houses. The state should be more agile at doing that. It should be recycling the capital, thereby fulfilling more people's wish to be homeowners by allowing them to transfer from renting to purchasing.

My final comment about the state sector—it is not specifically within the Minister's remit, but is part of the general housing problem—is on the provision of service housing. I have always favoured the idea that we should try to replicate the opportunity to buy within the confines of service life. I think that the way to do that is by having a home base concept in all the services, so that a soldier, sailor or airman knows what his or her home base is and has quarters or property there.

There should be an option: either they buy private sector property nearby, perhaps with help from the Government and their services employer, or, if they are in the military estate, there should be a proxy arrangement whereby they could take a mortgage on their quarters, flat or house. They would have the financial interest in it, but they would have to sell back to the state when they ceased to be in the military and would do so with the benefit of any rise in house prices by some suitable index or local arbitration. While they were in the services they would be collecting the money for a deposit and participating in the housing market, which they otherwise would be debarred from by virtue of their service tenure and need to rent service property. That could help. I do not like to see people coming out of the services after 20 years with no deposit and having rented service property all their life, and then local authorities say, "Well, you're not our responsibility because you haven't lived in our area long enough or at all," so they find it difficult to find housing. We need to do better by our service personnel.

Those are some thoughts for the Minister on how to improve and beef up the initiatives to get more people enjoying the benefits of home ownership. We seem to agree that the benefits are generally there. If we in politics can bring a bit more joy into people's lives and give more of them the things they would most like, it would be a worthwhile day's work. I offer those thoughts to the Minister in that spirit.

1.59 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, in a debate that is important for my constituency. I welcome the Minister to his place and trust that we can have a constructive relationship in working around the housing crisis in the city of York.

After 60 years without a local plan, the Tory and Lib Dem parties in coalition on City of York Council have proved that political expediency is far more important to them than addressing the needs of my community. That has an impact not only on the housing crisis and people desperately needing a home they can afford to live in, but on our public services and the local economy, because local businesses are also feeling the heat.

On Monday, the council's local plan working group approved a plan, after a further two years of delay, to focus on high-density, luxury developments in Labour areas of the city and to minimise development in the Tory and Lib Dem areas. That strategy will fail to deliver the minimum number of affordable units needed in York, as the coalition has taken the absolute minimalist approach to development and will not even meet its quota for affordable homes. The local plan does not build on the evidence presented by independent experts to build the right number of homes and the mix of

housing desperately needed in York, and it will not meet York's requirements for social housing, which is now at such a premium.

Owing to issues in the local economy, the city is not working; the local economy is struggling. Public services—I can name the healthcare sector and the NHS—are struggling to recruit the staff needed to support the city, because people simply cannot afford to live in York. York has many brownfield sites to develop. They are not ready for immediate development, because they need to go through a decontamination process, which we all understand takes time. However, housing on those sites and, in particular, the York Central site, with which I am sure the Minister is familiar, will be completely unaffordable for local people, because the City of York councillors have determined that the homes will be luxury apartments, which our city does not need. People who are already struggling to find and afford a home they can call their own will be unable to access that housing.

In fact, people on low incomes in York now have to find 8.9 times their salary for the cheapest properties in the city. That is out of their reach, so they are either leaving the city altogether, creating the crisis that we are seeing in many sectors, or having to rent privately. In York, 26% of housing is now in the private rented sector. The cost of renting a two-bedroom property is £838, and renting a three-bedroom property costs more than £1,000. The average cost of a house to buy is more than £300,000. The Minister can already see that York is becoming inaccessible for local people. The average wage in York is just over £22,000—it is a low-wage city because of the decline in its industrial base. There is an economic challenge as well as a housing challenge, which means that our city is altogether challenged. That is why I appeal to the Minister to look at how we can put solutions in place.

Dr Huq: I wonder whether my hon. Friend has had a similar experience to me. The cost of private rent is punitive, and buying is even worse. I do a lot of school assemblies, and every school I go to says that it has recruitment problems because people cannot afford to stay in west London. The schools can get good trainee teachers in their 20s, but the minute those people want to put down roots, they are off to Milton Keynes, Slough or wherever the nearest affordable place is, which creates an uneven age structure in the teaching staff and messes everything up.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In teaching and right across our public services, it is a real challenge for public servants to be able to live in these premium spots to provide the vital services for the next generation. That is the position particularly in our schools, but also across our health and care services and other vital services.

In York, there is a real shortage of the housing required. In 2015-16 alone, York suffered a 52% fall in affordable units delivered. The need is getting greater and access is getting further away. Over the past five years, house prices have increased by 27.6%. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is right to highlight the real issues with access to housing, but for my constituents it is only a dream.

In the council's debate on Monday, the Tory and Lib Dem councillors did not mention social housing once, yet 1,600 people are on the waiting list. I have met many

of them, and they are living in very cramped conditions. Just last week a constituent told me that they were sleeping on the settee and their child on the floor in their parents' house because they cannot access housing of their own. They are being moved from their accommodation and have nowhere to go, but the council cannot provide any housing for them. There will be a challenge in meeting people's needs, particularly the educational needs of their children, as a result of the housing situation. Whether we are talking about damp accommodation, which I come across, overcrowded accommodation or the rising number of homeless people in York, we must address the need for a supply of social housing and not just what is called affordable, because for people in York a quarter of a million pounds is totally unaffordable.

We will see this problem increase. Universal credit is being introduced this week, which will have an impact. There is also a real challenge with the amount of housing allowance that people get, because for the broad rental market area the calculation is based on an area broader than just York itself, so the amount of financial support that some families can get comes in under the rate they should get.

Bizarrely, the site of Imphal barracks was included in the local plan. Under this Government, Imphal barracks is due to close in 2031. There is a 15-year window for the local plan, so the window will close well before 2031 and that site should not be in the plan, because no housing will be put on it before the end of the local plan era. But the council saw that as a way of boosting the numbers—it is a false way. Those homes cannot be counted, so our housing crisis will be even greater.

The so-called local plan will be a total disaster for our city, but it is also an absolute scandal. I am talking about its focus on all these high-value, luxury apartments, which our city does not want or need. Where they have been developed in our city, they are used as assets. People do not live in those homes but just purchase them as an investment, or they are used just for holidays and race days or weekends. We hear about the story in London, but that practice is becoming more and more prevalent in York. That will not address the needs and the crisis that people are having to face in their own housing situation in York.

I would say that we are seeing an experiment in social cleansing—if not social cleansing itself—in what is happening in the development of York. This is the wrong kind of housing, in the wrong place, and it does not address local needs. We need social housing and truly affordable housing to meet the needs of our community, but it is at a level far lower than that which the Government have set. The local plan is the worst example of political manipulation at the cost of ordinary people I can think of, and the Government should not even allow it to hit their desk.

In the light of recent events, which have shown the needs of the poorest in our society being totally ignored by the elite, it is time for the Housing Minister to decide which side he is on. I have raised these issues with his predecessors on many occasions, but we have not been able to make any advance. That is why I trust that this Minister will be able to offer some hope to people in my constituency.

The people who live in my community need homes. That is basic. They are not looking for more; just homes where they can live and raise their families. I trust that

[Rachael Maskell]

these appalling proposals will be rejected, and that the needs of my constituents, our public services and my local economy will be met through a proper proposal for the housing that York needs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. Before we continue, it might be helpful to Members to know that I am required to start the winding-up speeches at about 2.30, and that three Members are seeking to speak.

2.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) on his helpful presentation on affordable homes, which included some good ideas about how the Minister can address the issue.

As a father with three sons and two granddaughters, I well remember having a full house while my son and daughter-in-law lived with me. That is the way it was, because that is what they needed to ensure they could be on the site and then move. I declare an interest as a landowner; I have had a couple of sites passed that I have then given to my children to help them. Not every child has that opportunity. I remember when they lived with us, with their baby, while they built their house. There was a period when they accumulated money to finance themselves, get a deposit and move on. They did not fall into a category eligible for social housing, which would have enabled them to pay less for rental accommodation. Things in Northern Ireland are very different; the matter is devolved, as the Minister will know. My son Ian and his partner Ashley also lived with us before they got their first home so that they could accumulate some cash for their deposit.

I understand that time is of the essence, Mr Bone, and I will speak about a couple of points. Young people need their own space and their own lives. Sadly, social housing is so strained that many young people who work are unable to get a foot in and are therefore stuck either paying someone else's mortgage by renting—as the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned—or living with parents for longer than they would like.

Couples who both worked while they had young children used to be an oddity; now, the family in which one parent can stay at home and look after the children is fast becoming the oddity. That is due not to extravagant lifestyles but to the cost of getting on the housing ladder and of running houses that were bought when prices were high. In my constituency, and perhaps across all our constituencies, there are homeowners who now have negative equity, and it will be a long time before they get out of it, if ever.

Getting on the property ladder can be difficult for a young family. That is where the Government must step up and step in to assist first-time buyers. One of my staff members here in London is buying a house at £575,000. How on earth can they do it? Only with the good will of family connections is it possible to get on the first level of housing in this city. The sister of a girl who used to work for me lives in London. They are both

accountants and probably fairly well paid, but the house that they are buying is £700,000. Where do people in London start if they want to buy a house?

The total housing stock in England increased by around 190,000 dwellings last year, as I am sure the Minister will mention. That is 12% higher than the previous year's figure, but well below the 250,000 that the Government said would be built. I heard someone in my constituency ask recently how we planned to fill all the homes that we are building in Newtownards—1,000 new homes on a 100-acre site on the east of the town. Lagan Homes will build some 550 houses on two sites in Bangor, and another major developer, Turkington, is developing a site at the foot of Scrabo in the middle of Newtownards.

House prices have increased slightly over the years, but there is an undersupply of affordable private rented accommodation, as every one of us here can attest. An increasing number of applicants on the social housing waiting list are in housing stress, all of whom pose particular challenges and must be dealt with using the framework for councils provided by the community planning process.

My council area, Ards and North Down, has a population of 158,000 and is still growing. Almost 19% of the population is aged 15 or younger, 61.6% are 16 to 64 and 19.5% are 65 and over. The issue is not just houses but whether accommodation is suitable to the age of the people living there, including pensioners and those with disabilities. New build starts in my council area increased by 66% between 2012 and 2014, but they fell again in 2015. The urgent housing wait list—people who need houses right now—is 1,300 people long, which indicates the scale of the problem.

No one has yet talked about co-ownership. My son and his partner have a house today because of co-ownership. That is what got them on the ladder; they had to start somewhere. We have not heard either about the option of living above shops. There are lots of shops in many cities and towns across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland with options for upstairs developments of flats, and we should consider that.

I am mindful of the time, Mr Bone. Major investment is needed in all constituencies across the United Kingdom. It will help local construction industries, and therefore the local economy, and allow families an adequate standard of living. It must be driven by Government initiatives. With great respect to the Minister, who I know will have a good response, as will the Opposition spokesperson, we should subsidise developers providing smaller pensioner homes, and help first-time buyers to get on the property ladder without increasing their long-term debt to an unmanageable level.

This debate is about not simply allowing houses to be built, but Government help, encouragement and involvement at every level, from social housing to affordable private housing. There must be a team within the Department to focus on the end goal of merging the two sectors to deliver for all the families in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They are crying out for fit-for-purpose affordable homes, and we have a duty to deliver them.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his self-restraint.

2.16 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The figures are these: home ownership among under-25s has dropped by 50%, and home ownership among 25 to 34-year-olds has dropped from 58% in 1997 to 37%. The multiplier between income and property price was 3.5 in 1997; today, it is 8.5. That is the reality.

In my very brief time, I will share the story of my constituent Jonathan, who is doing well in HR. He earns £38,000, which is £10,000 more than the London average. He thought that he could benefit from a London and Quadrant Housing Trust shared ownership scheme, only to find that a one-bedroom flat in Morris Court in my constituency would cost £500,000. That scheme is supported by the Government. Affordable by whom? Not Jonathan on £38,000 a year.

We need big thoughts, not little thoughts. We do not need to tinker; we need to think about the impact of buy to let on our economy, and particularly on our housing market. London is the only capital city in the world that does not restrict international investment in its residential property market. How can a young first-time buyer ever fight their way through?

We need a crusade in the public sector for councils and public sector bodies to make it a priority to use their land for low-cost home ownership and social rented accommodation. As long as they can sell it to the highest bidder, they will do so to subsidise their other services. I am not saying that they are wrong; I am saying that that is a consequence of what is going on.

The person I would like to pray in aid is not a natural ally; it is Paul Smith, CEO of Haart estate agents. He said in *City A.M.* yesterday that

“as the average loan size increases whilst the average income decreases”,

despite first-time buyers’ desire to buy, young people are being forced

“beyond their means, and government should intervene with a tax break as a quick and straightforward way to help them get onto the ladder...Theresa May’s legacy on home ownership has so far been a disaster. The ‘just about managing’ are further away from owning their own home than they ever have been, and the government’s feeble housing white paper did not go anywhere near enough to get housebuilders building and the market moving.”

I could not have put it better myself.

2.19 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate all Members for their measured tone in this debate, which is so important to our constituents. I declare an interest as a London homeowner and as a private landlord.

We need to see this debate in the context of the overall shortage of homes, particularly in my city and my borough, where home ownership is a desire for many but a pipe dream for nearly everybody. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and others highlighted, the multiplier effect is now so high that even people on a very good income in London cannot afford to buy a property; I was interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that the situation is the same in York.

The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) made a point about recycling and right-to-buy receipts. The situation is very difficult in areas such as Hackney. We have a shortage of land to recycle, and land is expensive. Since the ’80s, we have lost 10,000 homes to right to buy, yet the waiting list for social housing now stands at 12,100—the highest figure in 12 years. Up to 500 new people are applying to be added to that waiting list every month; if I have time, I will give some of their stories.

In my borough, more people rent privately than own their own homes—not because they do not want to own their own homes, but because they have no option. However, given rent levels in the private rented sector, it is amazing that they can afford to do so. A typical two-bedroom property costs £420 a week, while a four-bedroom property costs £683 a week. Those were the median values of London rents in January this year, according to data from the Valuation Office Agency. People are squandering money on private rented accommodation, unable even to think about putting aside a deposit, even if on their income they could afford to get on the housing ladder.

We need to examine the fact that so many people now need social housing because they cannot get on the ladder. The knock-on effect of this cost shunting is immense. Hidden homelessness is growing massively in my constituency: in many households, one family live in the bedroom while another live in the living room. Does the Minister have access to any figures on that?

This is one of the new big scandals. When I started out as a young councillor, I used to visit families in bed and breakfasts. There was then a cross-party consensus, driven by the Labour Government, to get rid of the practice of putting people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation. We are now seeing a huge cost in homelessness. My local newspaper, the *Hackney Gazette*, which comes under the umbrella of Archant, has done a good investigation on how much is being spent on homeless families. Hackney Council alone—just one London borough council—spent £35 million last calendar year to house homeless families in temporary accommodation, where they spend three to four years on average.

I used to say to people, “If you qualify as in need of housing, you might be in a hostel for six months, but hang in there and you’ll get something,” but increasingly they are now there for not just a year, but 18 months. I have known mothers come out of hospital with their newborn baby and go into a single room in a hostel with their other half and their toddler, alongside many other people with different vulnerabilities. That is not acceptable, as I am sure the Minister agrees. We want practical answers from him about how the Government will tackle the problem.

This comes down to the supply of housing. It is important that we build that supply to ensure that there are homes in the right places, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham said. Average prices in Hackney have risen by 85% over the last five years. The average price for a semi-detached property is now £920,000, while the average price for a flat is more than £500,000. Another important aspect of the problem is that many people are trapped in flats because they cannot afford to borrow the additional money they need to move into a house. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and

[*Meg Hillier*]

Acton (Dr Huq) said, that is how we lose key public sector workers: they may need an extra bedroom or want a different lifestyle, and they do not really have the option in Hackney.

Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee produced a report called “Housing: State of the Nation”, which was driven by our concern about the Government’s programme to release enough public land to build 100,000 homes over the last Parliament. That programme has improved thanks to the Committee’s scrutiny, but I warn the Minister that our report is part one of a series—not too long a series, I hope, if he listens to our concerns and takes on board our serious points. The report highlights the human costs of the homelessness problem: 120,000 children in England are living in temporary accommodation today. That is not only a cost to the public sector, but a human cost for those concerned and their communities. The consequences to individuals and to the taxpayer are immense. Having families moving around, changing schools and health providers, adds cost and stress to the system.

More affordable housing for ownership is vital, but so is ensuring that affordable housing for rent really is affordable. Even for working people, it can be very difficult to afford a council rent in Hackney, particularly if they are on minimum wage or are not working full time. Housing benefit is taking the strain, along with the private sector. Some £21 billion a year is spent on housing benefit. As a new Minister in his Department, I am sure the Minister is aware of that figure. I hope that over the summer recess, when Parliament is not there to subject him to detailed scrutiny—don’t worry, we’ll be back—he will take the time to think about how that £21 billion could be better recycled and spent to serve those in need of social rented housing, as well as those who want to buy.

Let me touch on some potential solutions for the Minister. Community land trusts are a really good opportunity to maintain the value of land for the benefit of the community in perpetuity. Public land is often sold off to the highest bidder, because that is how Departments balance their books, but if the Minister can get a double dividend, surely that is worth pursuing: decent homes for people that are affordable to buy or rent and that bring money into the public sector.

Planning clearly needs to be revisited, and so does shared ownership, because so many people are trapped in it. In fact, there was a shared ownership property for sale in my constituency for more than £1 million. When I pressed the housing association on it, it said, “It’s okay: four sharers on incomes of £70,000 each could buy it.” That is ludicrous. It is not what the whole model should be about.

We need to look at new models of ownership. Speaking as a Labour and Co-operative MP, I think we should be looking at co-operative ownership. That would require some legal changes, but I do not think that the House would resist such changes if they were proposed by the Minister. I am aware that the Government are worried about losing votes, but I think there would be strong cross-party consensus on this issue.

Finally, we need to raise the borrowing cap for councils, so that they can be more innovative in how they provide housing. My borough is doing a good job. It has

3,000 homes for building in the pipeline, of which 1,500 are for council housing at affordable rent, but the other half are for sale at high prices to subsidise the rest. Would it not be better to give the council the capacity to put that housing out there at a lower price?

I ask the Minister for answers on some specific points. Will he update us on the progress of the voluntary right to buy for housing association homes and particularly on the impact on councils, such as Hackney, with high-value council homes, which, under the original proposals, were expected to backfill the discount for those housing association sales? We are anxious to know what is happening, because we do not want to lose more of our affordable homes in an area of such high housing need. Will he also update us on the release of public land for new homes, which the Public Accounts Committee has scrutinised in detail? Will he give us the assessment of double households—hidden households—that I asked for? Have the Government really got a grip on that? I do not blame the Minister if not, because he is new to his brief, but it is vital that he gets a grip of it, because it gives an idea of the latent demand as well as the social cost.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden highlighted overseas absentee purchasers. Will the Minister consider holding serious discussions with the Treasury about taxing those overseas purchasers for buying properties that sit empty next door to the very hidden households that I represent? It is a complete injustice that in a city as rich as London, people are living in massively overcrowded conditions, unable to get on the housing ladder and unable to move from their small flat to a bigger home, while just down the road whole blocks are sold off overseas over a weekend and are never lived in.

2.28 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Bone. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) for securing it. A range of interesting and informative points have been made. From the contributions we have heard, there can be little doubt that housing is important for people and communities throughout the nations of the UK.

I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that aspirations are not being fulfilled. Everyone deserves a decent and affordable home to live in. Unfortunately, many people are being priced out of the communities they grew up in, either because of rising house prices and rents or, in some areas, simply because of the lack of available properties.

My own area is no exception, although the challenges we face are very different from those of London and the south-east. When we compare average house prices with the average salary in my local area, we find that house prices in the Falkirk area are around five times higher than salaries, and around six times higher in the West Lothian area. House prices continue to rise faster than local incomes, making a house a good investment for someone if they can afford it, but not everyone can.

There is more to housing availability than the supply of deliverable housing land. For many local residents price is not a factor, as they are simply unable to obtain a mortgage to buy a property in any case. We need a full mix of housing tenures for our communities to be

vibrant, which means market-value properties for purchase, affordable homes for purchase, and homes for rent, which are also essential to the mix. Affordable homes are essential in preventing homelessness, improving family wellbeing and tackling inequality. For example, last year in West Lothian there were 1,360 homeless presentations and there are 9,409 people on the council housing waiting list, which is a clear indication that local demand exceeds supply.

Undoubtedly, a range of contributory factors have led to the shortage of available homes. For example, we have an ageing population, and in my constituency it is anticipated that we will have a 130% increase in the over-75 population within the next 25 years. When that is coupled with the growth in single occupancy for younger people, it puts massive pressure on the number of available homes. However, I am in little doubt that the roots of the housing crisis stem from the Housing Act 1980, which resulted in sales that wiped out large swathes of housing stock across the UK. In this respect, I very much differ with the right hon. Member for Wokingham. Ensuring that the receipts from the sale of housing stock were either used to offset debt or reclaimed by the Treasury made it virtually impossible for councils to replace their housing stock. If councils had been able to do that, we might be in a very different position today.

Of course, housing and planning policies affecting Scotland are devolved. Under the Scottish National party Government, Scotland has scrapped the right to buy, and in doing so we have helped to preserve housing stock, protecting up to 15,000 social homes from being sold over the next decade. Government investment in housing, in partnership with councils, housing associations and developers, will generate economic activity in the region of £1.7 billion per year, on average, supporting around 14,000 jobs in construction and related industries across Scotland.

Between 2011-12 and 2015-16, the Scottish Government exceeded their target of building 30,000 affordable homes by more than 10%, with 33,490 affordable homes being built, including 22,523 for social rent, 3,473 for other affordable rents and 7,494 for affordable home ownership, all of which creates an important mix. The Scottish Government's affordable housing supply programme has a target to deliver 50,000 affordable homes by 2021. In addition, the Scottish Government are undertaking a wide-ranging review of the planning system in Scotland to improve its effectiveness.

I will highlight some of the Scottish Government's achievements. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has highlighted that the Scottish Government spend 85% more per head on social housing than England and Wales do. Also, the latest figures on housing completion rates show that across all sectors in Scotland we are achieving 73 completions per 100,000 of the population, which compares very favourably with 47 in England, 39 in Wales and 56 in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, the provision of affordable housing is fundamental to tackling inequality and ensuring sustainable communities, and it is important for the maintenance of social mobility. While the situation in Scotland is not perfect, the SNP understands that providing more affordable housing and more social housing must be a priority. I hope that UK Ministers find some examples of good practice in the positive work that has taken place in Scotland over the past 10 years.

2.33 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am told that I ought to declare an interest for the record: as the outgoing Mayor of Greater Manchester, I had responsibility for strategic planning and strategic housing.

I strongly welcome this debate and the opportunity to contribute to it. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) might be either glad or dismayed to know that I probably have a considerable measure of agreement with him in both the way he set out his case and the specific points he made. However, there was perhaps one sin of omission and one of commission.

I will deal with the omission first. I will quote Pete Redfern, the chief executive of Taylor Wimpey, who made a strong point in a review that he carried out last year, in which he said that

“it is vital that policy focuses...on all tenures”, because the impact of the rented sector on the home ownership sector and vice versa is still very powerful, and we must not neglect that. We must also recognise—in fairness, the Minister's predecessor had begun to take it on board—that there are some people for whom it will almost certainly never be possible to join the home ownership queues, and we must ensure that there is an adequate provision of high-quality affordable social housing.

I will pick up at an early stage the point that the right hon. Gentleman made about ensuring that our councils have adequate control, because one of the realities at the moment is that far too often developers win on planning appeal; he is right in that regard. However, such wins are massively against the interests of the rational planning of our communities, particularly in areas of dramatic growth of the kind he described in his own constituency. We must ensure that our local authorities have the capacity not only to determine where new homes are located, but to ensure that with that new housing comes the infrastructure to create liveable communities rather than just housing units. That is a very important point.

We have heard some powerful comments from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) about the reality of housing on the ground. We have a housing crisis in this country. It may not affect everybody—it does not affect me as an individual homeowner—but for members of my own family and certainly for many of my constituents there is obviously a crisis.

There is a homelessness crisis and a crisis for those who are inadequately homed—the “disguised” homeless—as several hon. Members have recognised. We are not seeing a high number of new homes built; we now have a crisis of building. One of the most dramatic features has been the major decline since 2010 in the number of people under 40 who are homeowners, because nearly a million people in that age group have disappeared from home ownership. I recognise that it is a moving age group, but that decline is still significant, showing that things are not as they ought to be.

The Government have to take some responsibility for this situation, including for a White Paper that, frankly, is not fit for purpose. I think that anybody who examines

[*Tony Lloyd*]

housing over any period recognises that short-term fixes simply cannot and will not work. We really need some consensus on both house building and house supply over about a 25-year or 30-year period. We ought to look with ambition at building 250,000 new homes ever year, which is the kind of figure that over time can make a material difference to supply. If we do not do that, the crisis that exists in London, and increasingly in cities such as York, will become the norm throughout our country. We must have an ambitious and radical move on house building.

Jim Shannon: It is important that we underline the type of accommodation that is needed in the future. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise—I think the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) referred to this—that those who are getting older need specific accommodation? In many places there does not seem to be much provision for that specific accommodation. Does he feel that it needs to be a central part of the Government's strategy as our population grows older?

Tony Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman brings me on to an important point. One thing that we must begin to recognise is that we do not actually have a housing market; we have many different segments of housing, all of which have different features. Of course we must recognise the needs of vulnerable people and older people—older people are not necessarily vulnerable, but they have different housing needs. Those needs must be recognised in a long-term housing strategy, and we must ensure that provision is across the piece.

I have the current figures on new starts. In their 2015 manifesto, the Government committed to building some 200,000 starter homes over the Parliament, which is 40,000 a year. Quite frankly, the figures are so dismal and so insignificant that we are failing not simply to hit the statistical targets, but failing real families and real people.

Meg Hillier: I hesitate to repeat myself, but, as my hon. Friend just said, the Government are building 40,000 starter homes, and I remind Members that the waiting list for housing in Hackney is 12,000. That is just one London borough. That demonstrates the stark gap between demand and supply.

Tony Lloyd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have got to have a radical shift in how we deliver things.

In the few moments I have at my disposal, I want to talk about some of the things we have to do. I applaud a number of comments made by Members from all parts of the Chamber. London is probably a special case, but there certainly has to be an examination of the capacity for people to move speculatively into the London housing market. They might not simply be overseas investors; in some areas it might be about recognising that institutional investors, or even private investors, have a detrimental impact on the capacity to house our population. A real issue has been raised about London in particular and the position of people on low pay in public services. We want them to work in our inner-city schools, but frankly they cannot afford to pay the rents or mortgages considered to be the norm.

When we still have the concept that a £450,000 property is affordable, we are living in the realms of fantasy. The traditional lending ratio that building societies offer is 4.5:1. By definition, that means that someone needs a family income of £100,000 for that affordable property. Most of us would not regard that as being the income of the people we want to target affordable housing towards.

Jim Shannon: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tony Lloyd: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not; the debate is short and I know that the Minister will want some time to respond.

We have to look at the question of land availability in a determined way. Some of that is about the cost of land. One issue we all face is that if land is valued at the post-development price, the landowner is the institution or person who creams off all the excess profit, even though the work is not put in by the owner, but possibly by the developer or the commonweal. We have to find some way of transferring the capacity for that value added into provision for the commonweal, whether through the public sector or more generally. We also have to look at the fact that in many of our cities—London, Manchester and northern cities generally—a lot of our brownfield sites are in need of enormous investment to bring them up to a level that is fit for building. Remediation is not just a fancy word; it is something that has to be invested in to make land usable.

We need to recognise that we have a massive skills shortage. There may be an ambition to increase housing supply, but we have a crisis looming with the ageing workforce in construction. The Minister needs to work with other Departments to ensure that there is some rational planning for the future. Frankly, it is not obvious that there is any sense of rationality or planning. If the two could be joined together, we may be in with a chance. We urgently need to tackle that skills shortage. If we do not and we have any kind of housing boom, we will once again see the development of the cowboy builder or prices going through the roof.

If we are to provide starter homes, we must ensure that they are starter homes in perpetuity. The discount needs to stay with the property, because otherwise we will never be able to guarantee, in our overheated housing market, that people will continue to be able to get on the housing ladder as first-time buyers. We need to ensure that Help to Buy for first-time buyers is realistic. Some of the suggestions that the right hon. Member for Wokingham put forward are well worth considering. We have to have something that allows first-time buyers to get into the property market. As Members have said, often the problem is not the cost of funding the mortgage—the mortgage is sometimes considerably cheaper than the rental alternative—but the deposit. The accumulation of the deposit is virtually impossible for many people, and we need to do something about that.

Where I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman is on the concept of right to buy. We have to look at one-to-one replacement. We have to ensure a consistent supply of housing in the social sector or under council ownership. There is nothing immoral about different types of tenure. We need to be tenure-blind in how we plan our future, but if we are tenure-blind, we have to ensure that the resources are there for that tenure.

The last point I will make, simply because of time, is this: I appeal to the Minister to look carefully at the role of social landlords. Social landlords in my city region told me that if they are given the opportunity to develop tenure-blind, they can increase the supply of new homes that they put on the market. The significant increase that they could provide would make a material difference. The artificial restrictions on social landlords are simply not helpful.

I once again congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing an important debate. We have to continue the debate, because we are scratching at the surface. We have a long way to go if we are to move to that sense of having a long-term vision for housing. Without that long-term vision, we will fail this generation and we will continue to fail future generations. This is an important debate, but it must continue.

2.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Communities and Local Government (Alok Sharma): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in this Parliament, Mr Bone. May I start by declaring an interest, in that my wife is the owner of a property that is rented out? I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) on securing this debate. I agree with other Members that we are debating an incredibly important subject. As ever, he made an incredibly thoughtful and intelligent speech, which has been the hallmark of his contributions since he entered this House in 1987. I would like to take some credit for helping him win that first election, because I was his bag carrier at the time.

I think the housing White Paper is a rather good piece of work. I was not involved in it, but it makes clear that there is no silver bullet, while acknowledging that for decades we have not built enough houses in the United Kingdom. I agree that every credible analysis says that we need to build between 225,000 and 275,000 homes a year to keep up with demand. There is a reason the White Paper is titled, “Fixing our broken housing market”. I hope colleagues will acknowledge that it is not just a question of individual Governments; successive Governments have tried but not succeeded in getting the house building market going. We have seen some progress: in 2015-16, some 190,000 homes were delivered, but I fully acknowledge that there is a lot more to do.

Whether housing is for sale or for rent, it is increasingly unaffordable, as we have heard from Members today. To give some statistics, to buy an average home in England costs almost eight times average earnings. Twenty years ago, it was three and a half times average earnings. I agree with my right hon. Friend that in this country people value owning their own home. A very large percentage of people want to do that. I also agree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) that there is an element of social mobility to home ownership. The Conservative party commitment in our manifesto is absolutely clear: we want to deliver a million homes by the end of 2020 and half a million more by the end of 2022. We need to do better, and that means tackling the failures at every point in the system. I know that Members have talked about those failures, and I will try to address them in my speech.

As one or two colleagues have noted, I am new to this brief. I have heard many of the suggestions that have been made, and I will take an opportunity over the summer to think carefully about much of what has been said, but the start has to be building more houses. In October, we launched the home building fund, which will provide £1 billion of short-term loan funding for small builders, custom builders and innovators to help diversify the house building market. The fund is versatile. It provides £2 billion of long-term loan funding for infrastructure, which we all agree is incredibly important. Many communities are happy to take more homes, but want the infrastructure to go with them. Although it is too early to see homes completed through the fund, I am confident that, over time, it will unlock up to 200,000 homes, with an emphasis on brownfield developments. I would encourage Members to spread the word to businesses in their areas that may benefit from that fund.

We are supporting communities by ensuring that they can get involved in local planning through neighbourhood planning. I do not know whether the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has had an opportunity to talk with her local communities about neighbourhood planning in the context of the local plan, which she expressed some concerns about.

As we have seen with neighbourhood plans that have been adopted and made, local communities are willing to take more housing. In fact, in the areas where plans have been adopted, an average of 10% more housing has been accepted than was the case under the plans of the local authority. What people do worry about is infrastructure, so we have introduced a £2.3 billion housing infrastructure fund to make sure that infrastructure is put in first, which is vital. The prospectus was launched on 4 July and I would again encourage hon. Members to bring the fund to the attention of their local councils. If every local council put forward high-quality proposals, I believe we could make a real difference. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham mentioned, we are talking about more roads, healthcare facilities and schools. Getting local people to accept housing means giving them more infrastructure.

On public sector land, we are taking direct action to release public sector land for development. Since 2011, we have released land or identified land to be released with the capacity for almost a quarter of a million homes. That is incredibly important and I want to get to grips with it in my brief. The accelerated construction programme will ensure that those homes are built quickly on surplus public sector land. The programme will also encourage new entrants to the market to deliver more homes overall.

We also need councils to plan for the homes that people want to live in, where they actually want to live. As we set out in the White Paper, we intend to consult on a new standardised approach to provide a transparent and consistent basis for the preparation of local plans, which is more realistic about the current and future housing pressures in each place and is consistent with the modern industrial strategy that we have set out.

Many colleagues talked about support for home ownership. I want to make it clear that the Government are absolutely committed to supporting home ownership and we are taking action to help first-time buyers. We have helped more than 400,000 households buy property through schemes such as Help to Buy and right to buy,

[Alok Sharma]

and 80% of those we have helped through Help to Buy have been first-time buyers. The number of first-time buyers is at a nine-year high. I agree that we need to be doing much better, but it is at a high. My right hon. Friend asked why the Help to Buy scheme applies only to new homes; the reason is that that helps to drive up supply.

Our shared ownership offers an important route in to full home ownership, by allowing purchasers to buy a minimum 25% share in a new-build home. We have also raised the income cap on shared ownership in England.

Siobhain McDonagh: What would the Minister say to my constituent, Jonathan, who earns £37,000 a year but cannot be part of a shared ownership scheme built by London and Quadrant Housing Trust, because the cheapest one-bedroom flat is half a million pounds? My constituency is one of the cheapest in London!

Alok Sharma: As I have acknowledged, we need to be building more homes—there is no doubt about that. I am happy to discuss with the hon. Lady that particular case. I am not here making excuses; I acknowledge the tone of this debate, which is that we need to be building more houses.

Tony Lloyd: Will the Minister reflect on the question of incentives to new home ownership? Restricting the scheme to new properties does a number of things. First, it restricts the supply. Secondly, it breaches the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) put forward about people wanting to stay in their communities. On top of that, older properties are often cheaper. The policy does not make a lot of sense.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that it is normal for the proposer to have a chance to reply.

Alok Sharma: I have noted the points that have been made and I am sure we will have individual discussions with colleagues.

Another issue noted was the rate of build-out and developers not building out on the planning permissions granted. As colleagues will know, we made proposals in the housing White Paper to ensure planning permissions are acted on much faster. I want to work with developers to help them, but they also need to help us to get homes built.

We had a discussion about social housing and affordable housing. Housing associations are responsible for about a third of all new housing supply every year. We are supporting them to build more affordable homes through our £7.1 billion affordable homes fund.

In the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it is more important than ever to reflect on our approach to existing social housing. That is why we are focusing on supporting housing associations and local authorities with their plans to regenerate existing housing estates. The estate regeneration national strategy and funding package was launched in December 2016 and more than 100 estates are already receiving funding.

It is clear that there is an enormous amount to do. Successive Governments have failed to provide the homes that we need. Although there has been some progress, it has not been good enough. I am determined to work with every organisation, business and colleague who has a role to play, to ensure that we build many more good-quality homes, which our country needs, to help more people achieve their dream of home ownership.

2.56 pm

John Redwood: I thank the Minister for his reply, as well as all colleagues who have contributed to a wide-ranging and informative debate. As we have been reminded, some prices of flats and houses, particularly in London, are now excessively high for anyone on any kind of normal income. That is a reminder to those thinking of buying their first properties that the best reasons are that they like the place, can afford to live in it on the financial terms available and like the freedoms that home ownership produces, because what we have seen in the last 40 years of great price growth, where people make a lot of money, might not be repeated given the very high levels that some properties have reached. The main purpose of a home is somewhere for the family to live, not as an increasing store of value, although that has been an advantage for those generations who have bought in recent decades.

I urge the Minister to get into discussion with the Ministry of Defence. I mentioned in my opening remarks a particular problem with the provision of accommodation for people leaving the services, who are not well served by the arrangements for service quarters. There are things that could be done—some using public money and public assets, and some that could be done by the private sector harnessing private money to the housing needs—that would provide a much better answer and not leave people in danger of being homeless when they leave our service. It is quite wrong that some people are placed in that position and councils are unable to help them.

I also urge the Minister to be in regular contact, as I am sure he is, with the Treasury. As previous Housing Ministers have discovered, the Treasury is crucial in the housing equation. High interest rates, which made difficulties with mortgages, used to be the curse of Housing Ministers, but that is not his problem. Perhaps in a way we have had the reverse; with all the quantitative easing, asset prices, including property, have risen rather more than they otherwise would have done. But there are a lot of tax issues. I was pleased that the last Budget did something about stamp duty, but it is still very high for people buying their first home in the more extended markets. Anything that can be done to cut the costs that the Government impose on buying a home and owning it will be extremely welcome.

I hope the Minister will look again at how wide-ranging some schemes are. I think we can make a good case to say that the Help to Buy loan should be extended from new homes to second-hand homes. Surely we are interested in the prospects of every individual trying to buy a home. It is not primarily a scheme to increase the number of houses being built—there are many other ways of doing that—but is primarily to involve more people in the housing market. It seems very odd to

ration that scheme only to people who are near a new development that would suit them when that might be only 1% of the properties on offer.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Organ Donation: Opt-out System

[Ms KAREN BUCK in the Chair]

3 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the introduction of an opt-out system for organ donation in England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Buck. I want to begin by sharing with the House my reasons for tabling my debate and by telling the stories of Max Johnson and Joe Dale. Yesterday, I had the privilege of meeting Emma and Harry Johnson—Max Johnson's mother and brother. Max is nine years old and has cardiomyopathy—a condition that enlarges the heart and can be life-threatening if left untreated. Max is kept alive by a tiny metal pump in his chest, and has been waiting for a heart transplant for six months. He is one of 6,388 people in the UK waiting for an organ donation. Last year, 457 people died while still waiting.

Joe Dale was a constituent of mine. He died last month after a sudden asthma attack, which caused devastating brain damage. He was just 16 years old. After his death, his family made the selfless decision to donate some of his organs so others might have the chance to live. Because of their decision, Joe became one of the hundreds of deceased donors who save and improve lives every year in the UK. I know that right hon. and hon. Members will want to take the opportunity to join with me in passing our condolences to Joe's family and giving our thanks for their brave determination to help others in spite of their personal tragedy.

The stories of Joe and Max, the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and the very important *Daily Mirror* campaign have re-energised my long-held belief that as a country, as politicians and as a legislature we can do more to help those in need of organ transplants.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): I will be very brief. My hon. Friend mentioned the *Daily Mirror* campaign and the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and other supporters, which failed due to the prorogation of Parliament and the general election. Luckily, I have position No. 6 in the ballot, and I want to inform my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis)—I compliment him most sincerely on conducting today's debate—that I intend to reintroduce the Bill pretty much as it stands. I will be presenting it next Wednesday in the House of Commons, and I hope I can count on my hon. Friends' support. That also applies to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Dan Jarvis: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the *Daily Mirror*, which ran a very important campaign for some time, and thanking it for the work it has done. I also thank him for confirming, I think for the first time, that he intends to use his private Member's Bill as an opportunity to introduce a legislative mechanism for the Government to change the law in England, should they wish to use it. I hope that will provide a forum where this matter can be further debated constructively in Parliament. I am very grateful to him for taking that

[*Dan Jarvis*]

decision, and I look forward to supporting his Bill and working with him and, I hope, the Government to make it a great success.

Four hundred and fifty seven unnecessary deaths a year is too many, and I believe it is our duty to reduce that number and save the lives of people such as Max. By changing the law to an opt-out rather than an opt-in system we in Parliament can do that.

The truth is that there is a common misconception about how organ donation works. Only a very small number of people die in a way that allows for organ donation. The vast majority of people on the organ donor register will never actually donate their organs. The figures are startling: about half a million people die every year in the UK, yet last year, out of that half a million, only 5,681 people died in circumstances that made donation possible—about 1%. Although there are hundreds of thousands of people across the country who are registered as potential donors, only a handful will ever be in a situation that allows donation to take place. The reality is that there are simply not enough registered organ donors. People in the UK—specifically in England—are dying as a result.

Accompanying those alarming facts are some more positive recent statistics, as reported in this week's "Organ Donation and Transplantation Activity Report for 2016-17". Last year, there was a 4% increase in the number of deceased donors to 1,413—the highest number ever in the UK. Coupled with more than 1,000 living donors, that has resulted in 4,753 life-transforming transplants this year—a 3% rise from last year. The number of patients whose lives were saved or improved by an organ transplant has increased by 3% to 4,753. All that means that more than 50,000 people are alive today thanks to a transplant.

The "Organ Donation and Transplantation Activity Report" is a good news story, but I believe we can make it an even better news story. Behind every statistic there are people, and, as Lorna Mason and Gary Masterson wrote this week in the annual transplant activity report:

"Every transplant is the result of a complex collaboration between donors and their families, a host of clinicians working in different parts of the NHS and finally in transplant recipients and their family."

They went on to say that

"opportunities for donation continue to be missed...While we cannot quantify every missed opportunity precisely, we need to work collaboratively to make sure that these are as few as possible."

Despite the excellent campaign run by the NHS to encourage organ donation—details of which can be found at www.organdonation.nhs.uk—the UK still has one of the lowest rates of consent in Europe for organ donation.

The "Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020" strategy, published in 2013, set the target of increasing the donation consent rate from 57% to 80% by 2020, in line with the better-performing countries in the world. That is the rate at which families who are approached by NHS Blood and Transplant actually go on to become donors afterwards. Although the consent rate has increased to 63%, it is still too far below this year's target of 70% and the 2020 target of 80%. Now is the time for us to do something about that.

I believe that the best way for us to increase the number of lives saved through organ donation is to adopt the so-called opt-out system—sometimes known as a system of deemed consent. Under the current law in England there is an opt-in system of organ donation. In other words, people must proactively state that on their death they would like their organs to be donated to someone else. And yet surveys consistently show that there are many more people who would like their organs to be donated when they die, but they are not registered. Polling conducted by the British Medical Association supports this and has shown that 66% of people in England would donate their organs after death, but only 39% have signed the organ donor register. That means millions of people here in England are willing to donate their organs, but are not registered to do so.

I am sure we all understand that people lead busy lives and that organ donation is not something most people think about on a day-to-day basis, but the reliance of the opt-in system on our not only thinking about it but finding the time to sign up is reducing the number of organs available and the number of lives saved. That is why many other countries use a different system.

Wales has had an opt-out system since December 2015 and only last month the Scottish Government announced plans for a similar system of organ donation in Scotland. In a statement, the Scottish Health Minister said:

"Moving to an opt-out system of organ and tissue donation will be part of the long-term cultural change in attitudes to encourage people to support donation."

That view is increasingly shared by countries around the world and by many of our European neighbours such as Austria, Belgium and Spain, which all use variations of the opt-out model. It is time that we in England joined them, modelling our system on that in Wales where they offer three clear options: first, to register someone's wish to be a donor by opting in to the system; secondly, to register their wish not to be a donor by opting out; and thirdly, to have their consent to donation deemed by taking no action.

It was argued when the law was passed that the availability of the three options would increase the number of organs available for donation, and that that in turn would save lives. I am pleased to say that the evidence from Wales suggests that such assertions were correct and that the new law is working. Indeed, the potential pool of organ donors has almost trebled since 2014-15, and the opt-out system does not appear to have deterred individuals from proactively opting in. It is right, of course, that we strike a note of caution with that data, but the initial signs are encouraging.

I now want to address some of the concerns that people have about an opt-out system of donation. This is undoubtedly an emotive issue and there are strong feelings on both sides of the debate. I would not want to question anybody's motives in deciding whether they wish to be a donor. It is, after all, a deeply personal matter. Under an opt-out system, people would not be required to give a reason for choosing not to be a donor, as the system is not about trying to shame people into becoming donors. Also, similar to what is happening in Wales, any new law would need to be accompanied by an active public awareness campaign: first, to ensure that people understand the new system; secondly, to encourage more people to make the positive

decision to become an organ donor; and thirdly, to give people who may want to opt out the information they need to do so.

I understand that some people have concerns that an opt-out process raises the risk that a person will have their organs taken against their will and against their families' wishes, which in turn could cause unnecessary distress to the families of the deceased. I also understand that such concerns may be more prevalent within some ethnic and religious groups and that some members of our Muslim and Jewish communities have different interpretations of the religious legitimacy of deceased donation. I completely get that. I understand their views and have the utmost respect and sympathy for them. However, I firmly and wholeheartedly believe that not only do the benefits of an opt-out system far outweigh the risks, but that the risks can be mitigated through a public awareness campaign tailored to different ethnic and religious communities and through the use of in-hospital safeguarding measures. Any new system would have to ensure there were safeguards in place to ensure that no one's organs were donated against their wishes; that the opt-out system applied only to those over the age of 18; and that for those under 18 it continued to be the case, as it was with my constituent Joe Dale, that the family have the final decision, because it is vital that nobody feels as though they are being coerced.

I also accept that changing the law is not the only change we need to make. It would need to be part of a wider package of measures to increase organ donation. We need to redouble our commitment to the "Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020" goal of increasing the consent rate to 80%, and to consider carefully whether the strategy needs strengthening in the light of the progress so far.

The evidence from Wales and from countries across Europe gives us the confidence to say that an opt-out system would be an important step forward. For that reason, I very much hope that we can proceed on a cross-party basis. I respect anyone who takes a different view on an issue of conscience such as this, but it is clear that the principle of deemed consent has support from Members of all parties across the House.

The Health Secretary recently told the House that an opt-out system has "a lot of merit". Only yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, the First Secretary of State told me that

"organ donation is clearly a hugely important part of our system, and the Department of Health is looking at the impact of those changes to see if those can give rise to further improvements in the number of available organs."—[Official Report, 12 July 2017; Vol. 627, c. 290.]

I welcome such statements because I know that an opt-out system has merit. When the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of Health, the hon Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), winds up the debate, will she tell us what work is taking place in her Department and when it will report?

Before I conclude, I want to take a moment to say how much my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) wanted to be here today. About a year ago, her daughter, Rebecca, a fit young marathon-running mother of one, had blood tests that indicated kidney failure. Three weeks ago she had surgery at the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle to enable her to start dialysis. Today, she joins the 6,000 other people on a

waiting list for an organ donation. The average wait for a kidney on the transplant list is two years. I know that all hon. Members will want to join me in wishing Julie, Rebecca and their entire family all the very best. Also, I want to take this opportunity to thank charities such as Kidney Care UK for their work. Because of these stories we should move forward as quickly as possible; children such as Max and mothers such as Rebecca do not have the luxury of time to wait. Anything that we can do to help them get a new organ is a step worth taking so that they can join the thousands of people in our country who have benefited from organ donation.

We have a duty of care to those in our society who need help, and that includes those who need transplants. We can and must do more to help them. We cannot save the 457 lives lost last year, but who knows how many we could save in future? As an old friend once told me, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now." I very much hope that the Government will act.

3.19 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing the debate and on his sensitive and compassionate tone; I hope I can reciprocate. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is imperative to work to increase the number of organs available for donation, because every week people in this country die because there is a shortage of available organs. The critical question that we must ask today is whether presumed consent would help with that.

Presumed consent certainly seems an attractive proposition, but perhaps I may enter a note of caution, to aid our early deliberations on the matter. One of the key legal principles I was taught as a student lawyer was that silence is no reply, which means that, much as we might like to draw conclusions from silence, there are good reasons why it may be inappropriate to do so. Introducing the principle of presumed or deemed consent would involve a major change with respect to organ donation. It would effectively mean that even if someone did nothing at all—did not sign an organ donor register, or opt out or in—a consequence would be triggered. The person's silence would trigger a quite major action. Their organs could later be taken and transplanted. Consent would be deemed, although they would have done nothing.

Of course, some people, on seeing the publicity that might surround the introduction of presumed consent, would deliberately and knowingly decide to do nothing, aware of the consequence; they would be comfortable with that. Those people would be aware that they had, in doing nothing, effectively chosen to donate. However, there would inevitably be a significant group of people who missed the publicity altogether. We need to be sensitive to that.

Informed consent is an important principle, undergirding the relationship between the citizen and the state, so it is right that the House should explore the issue carefully, which is why I welcome the debate. It is critical to explore whether, for example, it is right in this instance to undermine the principle of informed consent by introducing presumed consent. Is it possible that that could create a precedent that might be appealed to in future for less enlightened purposes?

[*Fiona Bruce*]

Some practical concerns were highlighted during the debates in Wales that preceded the legislation there, some of which I did not feel were satisfactorily resolved at the time. When the Welsh Government made the case for introducing presumed consent, they based their case, at least in part, on a piece of research by two academics, Abadie and Gay:

“Evidence...suggests that introducing an opt-out type system could result in a 25 to 30 per cent increase in deceased organ donation rates which could equate to a further 15 donors each year in Wales, each of whom...on average might donate 3 organs. This means around 45 more organs could become available to the UK pool for transplantation.”

I understand that the research compared practices in other jurisdictions, and classified Spain, the country with the highest donation rate in the world, as a presumed consent country. Spain introduced presumed consent legislation in 1979, but the law has never been implemented; Spain is still in practice an informed consent jurisdiction like England. Indeed, rates of donation there started to increase only when, 10 years later, Spain made other changes, in particular investment in the organ donation infrastructure. It increased the capacity, training and availability of medical staff to talk to families about donating the organs of a loved one when a life has tragically been cut short.

A leading expert in the field, Professor John Fabre, unsuccessfully tried to point out to the Welsh Government their misconception. In an article entitled “Presumed consent for organ donation” in the journal *Clinical Medicine*, he referred to their explanatory memorandum, published in December 2012, to the Bill that became the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act 2013. It stated:

“For example, an opt-out system is operated in Spain and it has the highest donation rate in the world.”

As I have said, Spain, even today, does not operate an opt-out system, so I believe that that statement was incorrect, even though it was cited in official papers in Wales, underpinning the presumed consent legislation. The recognition that the country with the highest donation rate in the world does not in fact operate a presumed consent system is important in any assessment of the efficacy of presumed consent. It is also striking that some of the countries that are least successful with their organ donation rates, including Sweden, Greece and Bulgaria, operate presumed consent.

A second objection raised during the debate in Wales was the fact that in some countries the introduction of presumed consent has been associated with significant numbers of people withdrawing from donation. Some people interpret the introduction of presumed consent, despite its noble motivation, as the state seeking to claim their organs without proper consent. Rather than seeing it as a mechanism for donation, they see it as a mechanism for bypassing consent to donation. There has been some evidence of that in Wales. Giving oral evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, organ transplant specialist Dr Peter Matthews, who was based in Morriston Hospital in Swansea, said:

“My own experience is that the British psyche has a particular view that what it should do is donate organs as an altruistic gift, and if it is felt that the state is going to take over the organs, then there is the potential that people who may have been willing to become a donor will not do so. We have seen two cases in

Morriston where patients who were on the organ donation register, on hearing about this, said to their families that if the state was going to take their organs, they were no longer willing to give them. We lost two donations”.

During the debate on the Bill in Wales, three Assembly Members relayed similar stories from constituents.

I want to comment on the impact of presumed consent in Wales. NHS Blood and Transplant records donations on a yearly basis, from April to April, and the first full year of results that we have from Wales is for 2016-17. The data tell us two important things: first, in 2016-17, 61 deceased donors facilitated 135 organ donations. Far from representing the anticipated increase of 15 donors and 45 organs, that apparently constituted a decline by three donors and 33 organ donations from the previous year’s figures. That might come as something of a surprise, because some people have suggested that the system was a great success. However, under informed consent a family can donate the organs of a deceased person if the deceased has signed neither the organ donation register nor the opt-out register, which means that, as we have heard, in Wales prior to December 2015 the families or living representatives of the deceased could—as they can here—decide to donate their loved one’s organs. But under presumed consent those informed consent donations would be reclassified as presumed consent donations. Critically, that does not mean that those donations would not have happened under the old system.

Secondly, and not surprisingly, bearing in mind what Dr Matthews told the Assembly, there has been a huge increase in the number of people in Wales opting out. In 2016-17, 174,886 people in Wales were on the opt-out register. That figure far outstrips comparable figures for other parts of the UK, where consent is not presumed. Only 27,559 individuals in England, 1,834 in Scotland and 204 in Northern Ireland have opted out. That means that a staggering 85.5% of individuals in the UK who have opted out live in Wales, despite the population of Wales representing only 4.8% of the UK population.

I have cited a lot of figures, but I do so to get them on the record and to aid our debate. To appreciate fully the cost of the change in Wales, we must remember that prior to the introduction of presumed consent, people who had signed neither the opt-out register nor the opt-in register were potential donors.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree with the Welsh Government’s conclusion that 40 lives have been saved under the presumed consent scheme that would have been lost under the previous arrangement?

Fiona Bruce: My concern is to demonstrate that we have to look very carefully at some of the evidence that the Welsh Government used to come to their conclusions.

Where someone has signed the opt-out register, conversations cannot even begin. That means that more than 174,000 of the Welsh population have effectively been removed as potential donors. Previously, in the absence of express direction to do otherwise, those people’s families, as their living representatives, might have been happy to donate their loved ones’ organs at their death. When Wales embraced presumed consent, the other UK jurisdictions said that they would wait to

review the results in Wales before deciding whether they wanted to go down that path. I ask the Minister to look at the evidence.

We have significantly increased donation levels in England since implementing the recommendations of the organ donation taskforce in 2008, which of course came down very much against presumed consent. Rather than seeking to emulate Wales, England should perhaps seek to emulate Spain and put its emphasis on lowering the family refusal rate by increasing the number of clinicians who are trained and available to discuss this issue with families when the need arises—often at short notice.

Professor Fabre concluded his seminal paper in *Clinical Medicine* in the following terms:

“Rather than legislating for the consent of donors, we should be addressing the misgivings and misunderstandings of families so that they decline donation much less frequently, as has been done so successfully in Spain. An acceptance rate of 85% is a realistic and achievable objective for the UK over a 5-year period. As previously, we have the Spanish model to guide us. It will not be easy. It will require...a detailed plan at the national level”.

I very much hope that the Minister will consider all those points and confirm that the Government will take into account every possible consideration and concern about this issue before any legislation is introduced. I look forward to her response.

3.33 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate and on the clarity and comprehensiveness of his speech. He covered the ground in commendable fashion and hit the significant factors involved.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) rehashed the debate in Wales. She mainly addressed opinions and fears that were expressed before the change was made in Wales. I am sure that those fears were sincere, but they have not been realised in the way that she suggests. It is not important that the Welsh Government might not have had entirely accurate evidence; evidence rarely is entirely reliable, and there may have been misunderstandings. What is crucial is the outcome, which is impressive. At least 40 lives were saved—at least 40 people are alive today who would not have been had the presumed consent Bill not passed. As my hon. Friend said, the figure for lives lost in England is 457. That is an extraordinary number of people. If there were an accident today in which that number of lives was lost, that would be our main concern.

My interest in this issue began in 2012, when my 22-year-old constituent Matthew Lammas came here to lobby me and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). That young man was in need of a heart transplant. He had a heartbreaking story of so many false alarms. He would get a call at perhaps 2 o’clock in the morning to drive to Middlesbrough or Birmingham, but halfway up he would get another call to say, “Sorry; somebody else got the heart—someone got here before you.” Six months after he visited me here, I attended his funeral. A 22-year-old man’s life was lost. I am absolutely convinced that, had we taken the bold decision to introduce presumed consent in Wales six years ago, we would be in a far better position and Matthew Lammas’s life would not have been lost in that way. Those are the simple facts.

There have been extraordinary changes in Wales since the passage of the presumed consent Bill. No one in Wales has died for lack of an organ since that system came into effect. In 2015-16, 214 organ transplants were carried out and 192 patients were on the organ donation waiting list. There was a great deal of concern in Wales, and we all understand that; we all know the feeling of wanting to treat the bodies of our loved ones with reverence and care. There is something that upsets us profoundly about the idea of organ transplantation. There are also genuine religious objections, which were played out again and again in Wales. But I come back to my point: look at the outcome.

There has also been a huge change in public opinion in Wales. In 2014-15, 48.5% of the people of Wales had consented to donating their organs. The figure leapt to 64% in two years. Public opinion has come around to this. We must congratulate the *Daily Mirror*, which demonstrated tabloid journalism at its very best. I am not sure that this sells many papers, but it has, for all the best reasons, boldly sought to ensure that this life-saving measure is introduced. We can now have great optimism, because my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), who came sixth in the private Member’s Bill ballot, announced that he will take this issue up, and there is every chance that the spirit of this Parliament will take it forward.

We rejoiced this week when a decision was taken about the long-standing injustice of contaminated blood. We have come to a consensus about that, and the Government have shown themselves willing to move forward and introduce valuable reform. When I introduced my Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill in the last Parliament, my contact with the Government was entirely friendly. They were reasonable; they were cautious in reaching conclusions but made it clear that the door was open for reform soon. We can change that figure of 457 avoidable deaths. We must move rapidly and find consensus among all parties to take the clear and unambiguous lesson from Wales that presumed organ donation consent saves lives.

3.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on presenting what I thought was a passionate, honest and fair contribution. This is a matter I am also interested in and seriously believe in. I will say early on that I subscribe to the opinion put forward by the hon. Gentleman, because I feel that is the way things should be. That is a personal opinion. All of us here obviously agree that organ donation is important, but we might look at it in different ways.

I am not interested in this only because of my role as the DUP’s health spokesperson; I also have a personal interest relating to family members. The hon. Gentleman gave the example of one of his constituents. My nephew Peter was born with a kidney the size of a peanut, which is probably fairly hard for people to comprehend. From the day he was born to the day he had the transplant, he was on dialysis treatment, which, once someone has started, they cannot come off. I am very aware of the issue, and I will make an honest, personal contribution to the debate.

Someone in this world donated that kidney to Peter, who is alive today because of it. The alternatives were looked at by the family, and everyone looked at it in the

[*Jim Shannon*]

way that they thought best. His mother was going to give her kidney, but then she became pregnant, so that opportunity fell away. In the meantime, someone else came forward with a kidney donation, which Peter had. Peter is the same age as my second boy, so I can quite honestly relate to the difference between the two boys as they grew up. I understand the importance of organ donation, and believe that people certainly should be on the register.

I was on the Organ Donation Northern Ireland website just before we came here, and the first sentence I read really impacted upon me:

“Most people would accept an organ if they needed one.”

That is not really surprising, is it? Yet only 40% of us in Northern Ireland have signed the NHS organ donor register. We would all want an organ donation if we needed it, but we have not all signed up. I have to ask the question honestly, sincerely and fairly to those here: if that is the issue, would they not donate their organ? I know that I would.

I carry a wee organ donation card, although it does not make any difference. It is long faded because it has been in my wallet—they say that the money in that wallet is like a prisoner, but that is by the by. I signed up for the card when I was 18, although that is no longer necessary, because when people sign up for their driving licence and tick that box, they are registered forever. That is how we do it in Northern Ireland. The card is very faded, but it says:

“I would like to help someone to live after my death”.

That is its purpose.

I was returned for Strangford with 42% of the vote in 2015, and this year—I thank the people of Strangford for this—I was returned with 62%. I have to tell hon. Members that it is a much better position to be in this time around than in 2015. It is a lot more safe and secure, but how much more so for those who need donations as a matter of life or death? Last year, 12 people died in Northern Ireland while waiting for an organ transplant. That may not seem a huge number, but speak to those 12 families and hear exactly what it means to them. Every one of us in the Chamber—those in the Gallery and hon. Members who are contributing—will know exactly what it means. It is a phenomenal loss.

The sad fact is that some people who passed away in that same year may well have wanted their lives to make a difference by donating their organs, but because their families did not know, it did not happen. It is about raising awareness, having the debate today and every one of us searching our souls and consciences for how to respond. It is really important that we do so; it is a conscious decision that everyone should consider. I completely believe that this is a matter of conscience. In fairness, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central said that in his contribution. He recognises that it is a matter of conscience, and I heard that in what others said as well.

I will look down on no one who feels that, due to a religious belief or some other belief, they cannot donate their organs. That is freedom of belief in action and the conscience clause is important, but what I cannot understand is someone who simply refuses to consider

or discuss the possibility. I agree with the Welsh example: I believe that people should be on the list unless they opt out. We have to up the ante and move forward constructively.

I mentioned the case of my nephew. There is another case that I always remember. There was a gentleman in Newtownards whose son was injured in a car accident. Unfortunately, he was on life support and was going to die. His dad told me that his son, by his death and donation, was able to save six lives. In Newtownards we also have a very active group of people who are donation recipients. The council at that time—it was called Ards Council then; it is now Ards and North Down Borough Council—had made a remembrance garden, which we had an opening ceremony for. Many people in not only my constituency but across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland understand exactly what this means.

The last time I spoke about organ donation in this Chamber, I said that 30% of people in the UK were registered to donate. That figure is now 36%. That is great, but it is still not enough. That is why we have to do something and look seriously and honestly at what is being proposed today. Registered donor numbers have increased every year since 2012 and are 20% higher than five years ago, yet three people a day are still dying needing a transplant. Is that right? No, it is not. We have to do something about that. The figure could be lower if people were prepared to think or talk to loved ones about it.

I see so many driving licence forms in my office. It is not for me to judge, and I will not—I never judge anybody on donation—but on too many of those driving licence forms people have not ticked the box to say that they want to be a donor. I do not know why they have not done it. It is up to them to make their own mind up, but when our time comes to pass on from this side of the world, we can help someone. If I can help someone with this old, fragile, diabetes 2 body standing here, why should I not? It is time that people understood the importance of this decision.

I am conscious that other Members want to speak, so I will not ramble on too much longer, but I want to make a wee comment about Wales. We are all aware that in Wales, where they have had so-called deemed consent since December 2015, only 6% of the population has chosen to opt out, which speaks volumes. More importantly, in that one year in Wales, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said, 39 organs were transplanted through deemed consent out of a total of 160 transplants. That 39 out of 160 was a significant contribution to saving lives. Why should we not do that? I cannot get my head around it at all.

I will finish with this, because you are giving me the eye, Ms Buck, so I need to be careful. I urge people to be aware of the decision and the impact that it can have on families. We must take more positive steps to see a better take-up of organ donation, while always ensuring that people can make the choice themselves. I am conscious of the conscience clause. The simple fact is this: we can save lives in our deaths. Let us encourage people to do this in a manner that is sensitive and yet makes clear the case that we would nearly all take an organ if we needed one—would we not?—and should therefore all be willing to give one.

3.48 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I want to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on not just securing this debate but taking the opportunity to raise this incredibly important issue at Prime Minister's questions yesterday.

I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) will be introducing his presumed consent private Member's Bill when he gets his opportunity on a Friday. I hope we will not see a repeat of the usual filibustering, which means we cannot have a proper debate and do not get the opportunity to vote on the Bill. It is really important that the House finally gets the chance to express its view on this matter, and that will not happen if the Bill is simply talked out.

I want to reiterate the concern that has been expressed about our not being on target to achieve an 80% consent rate for donation after death by 2019-20. We have missed the strategy's interim targets every single year. More needs to be done to make a difference and to save lives. We have a moral obligation to do something, which in this case means introducing presumed consent. It is neither perfect nor a panacea for all the issues surrounding organ donation but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central and others who spoke in the debate, it would make significant difference.

A constituent contacted me today about her severely disabled son. She is concerned that he lacks capacity to opt out and she is worried that in the medical profession's view some lives may be worth less than others. It is important to give people such as my constituent the reassurance they need, and that is not just about the right to opt out. As we have seen in Wales, where there is a soft opt-out procedure, families still get consulted. It is important to put people's minds at rest.

Across Bristol, there are more than 182,000 people on the register, with more than 38,000 in my constituency. In March, 27 people in the city were on the active transplant list, 13 of whom were in my constituency. Last year, there were 10 deceased donors and 22 deceased donor transplants. At the moment, we are not quite keeping up with demand.

Cystic fibrosis is a subject dear to my heart, not least because my 12-year-old niece, Maisie, has it. It is a life-limiting illness that affects 10,800 people in the UK and most of them will need a lung transplant to extend their life and improve their quality of life. I want to take the opportunity, slightly gratuitously, to pay tribute to Maisie's 14-year-old brother, Isaac, and her 17-year-old sister, Lilli, who did a 65 km—40 mile—walk across the Peak district the weekend before last to raise a few thousand pounds for the Cystic Fibrosis Trust. It was quite a trek.

The trust does brilliant work to raise funds and to support the families of people with cystic fibrosis, most of whom will need a lung transplant at some point. About 50 cystic fibrosis patients receive a transplant each year. It is the third most common reason for lung transplantation. Such patients have the best outcome, with 60% of recipients living at least five years after donation.

At any time, about 60 people with cystic fibrosis are on the transplant waiting list. Patients on the list are generally not expected to live more than a couple of

years if they do not receive a transplant. One in three will die before they can receive one, so you will understand, Ms Buck, why it is important to me that we up the donation rate and make sure that lungs are available whenever possible.

The Cystic Fibrosis Trust does not see opt out as the only answer. I am sure the Minister knows that it has been calling for a national allocation system so that there is less of a postcode lottery and it is not just people who are fortunate enough to be in a place where lungs are available for transplant who get them. Last month, NHS Blood and Transplant announced that it would move from a regional system to a fairer national allocation system for urgent cases. The Cystic Fibrosis Trust has, of course, welcomed that.

Organ donation is complicated. It is not just a case of finding available lungs and a donor who wants them. According to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, 75% of clinically usable donor lungs are not used. It wants more training for doctors because only three doctors in the UK can downsize lungs to make them suitable for smaller patients. It is often teenagers and people in their early 20s who have poor lung capacity and need new, downsized lungs. Will the Minister consider training more people to ensure lungs can be used?

Repairing sub-optimal lungs to make them suitable for transplant is also an issue. Spain has the highest organ donation rate in the world not just because of its opt-out system but because it has medically trained transplant co-ordinators, uses intensive care beds better and more frequently, has different admission criteria for its intensive care units and uses more high-risk donors.

I appreciate that we are talking specifically about presumed consent, but I want to ensure the Minister is aware of all the wider issues. I hope she will work on those as well as supporting the opt-out Bill.

3.54 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am delighted to be having this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing it. He told us the moving stories of Max and Joe, bringing a human aspect to the debate. He underlined that deaths are preventable, but that although 66% of people in England would donate, only 39% are on the donor register. Combined with the knowledge that only a small number of people on the register of donors will be able to donate, that highlights the fact that there is clearly a lot of work to be done.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) added a few notes of caution, with the view of aiding an informed debate. There are always at least two sides to a debate, and being informed does us no harm. Unfortunately, she is no longer in her seat to hear me say so; to me, hanging on for an entire debate is important.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), speaking in his own inimitable style and even summing up the debate for me at one stage, told the story of Matthew, a 22-year-old man who unfortunately lost his life, and the feeling that had a system been in place back then, an operation could have been available and his life might have been saved. The hon. Gentleman also urged England to follow Wales's lead by implementing a soft opt-out scheme.

[*Ronnie Cowan*]

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about his nephew Peter, who required a kidney and fortunately got one, and is alive today due to that donation. Not everyone in Northern Ireland has been as fortunate. He also highlighted that one donor can save multiple lives.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke about missed targets, saying that no plan is perfect, which reminded me of the Churchill quote:

“Perfection is the enemy of progress.”

She also spoke passionately about the needs of those with cystic fibrosis.

There were a few false starts, but now that the Welsh Government’s soft opt-out is up and running, the Scottish Government have announced plans to do the same thing. An independent evaluation of the implementation of the Welsh opt-out system is due to be published in December 2017, and we believe that the numbers will be encouraging, but if even one donor has been identified, it must be worth it. The British Medical Association has stated that it believes that, over time, an opt-out scheme promotes more positive social attitudes to donations, so it may well be that we will not see the benefits for a few years to come.

I believe that the most important people in this debate are the many waiting for a donor—those whose lives are poorer or even on the line as they wait, and wait. This is not solely about saving lives; it is about improving them. One donation does not simply save or improve one life; it has a knock-on effect. My colleague Iain Fraser would not have been born if his father Sandy had not received a kidney many years ago. I thank Sandy Fraser for his ongoing commitment and work in his capacity as the chairman of the Scottish Kidney Federation.

I ask Members: if they had a loved one, as many of us do, whose life could be transformed by receiving an organ donation, would they not turn over every single stone and investigate every possibility in order to identify a donor? I hope that is what we are about to do. In my view, a soft opt-out scheme is the path to go down, but whatever comes of this debate, it must stimulate discussion. We should all make our wishes known to our friends and family. When my time comes, as it will, please take whatever you want.

3.58 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this debate, his excellent contribution and all the work that he has done in recent weeks to raise awareness of the need for more people to become organ donors. I commend other hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions to this debate; the *Daily Mirror* for raising awareness of organ donation since the case of Max Johnson, a nine-year-old boy in need of a new heart; and the more than 9,000 people who signed the Change.org petition.

I also pay my respects to other hon. Members who have brought this issue to our attention over the last decade or so. They include my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who

introduced a private Member’s Bill on this topic back in 2004, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who introduced a private Member’s Bill more recently and who spoke so well today.

I will quickly set the scene on organ donation in the wider sense and then move on to the situation in countries such as Wales and Spain, in which opt-out systems have been introduced. Finally, I will talk about three tests that Opposition Members would like the Government to look at, if such a system were implemented in England, to ensure that patients, NHS staff and community groups could have confidence in such a change in the law.

There is no doubt about the need for more organ donors in England. We have heard about that so clearly today. With so many people on the waiting list for new organs, it is important that we get more people signing up to donate their organs so that we can ensure that more people have the chance to live. That is why it is welcome that in a written answer last year, the then Public Health Minister, Nicola Blackwood, confirmed that since 2008 organ donation across the UK had increased by 68% and transplants by 47%, and that 2015-16 saw the highest ever deceased donor rate in the UK, with 1,364 deceased donors resulting in 3,529 transplants.

However, as we have heard, there is still a lot more to do because, tragically, 1,000 people every year die while waiting for a transplant. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central, 6,388 people in Britain need a transplant. That includes 183 children. It also includes Rebecca, the adult daughter of my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott). I send my hon. Friend, Rebecca and all her wider family my best wishes, as I am sure we all do.

Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and, I am sure, others here today, I am a card-carrying organ donor. As soon as I became old enough to carry a card, I did, and that was also because of a direct family experience of someone requiring organ donation. My Aunty Ella was one of the pioneers of organ donation when she received a kidney transplant at the fantastic Freeman Hospital in Newcastle. That was about 50 years ago. I have just looked this up: the first organ donations at the Freeman were in 1967, so my Aunty Ella was literally one of the first. She had a very young family at the time. I was born in ‘66, but I can remember being told that all she wanted was to live long enough to see her children grow up. Well, she saw her children grow up, get married and go on to give her grandchildren. That is what organ donation is all about: it gives people a future.

There are issues, though, when it comes to black and minority ethnic communities. NHS Blood and Transplant reported that 66% of people from BME communities in the UK refuse to donate their organs, despite being more likely to need a new organ because of a predisposition to certain illnesses, such as diabetes and hypertension. I will cover that issue when I come to the three tests that we would need to set. It is why it is welcome that we have had an opportunity today to debate this issue and everything that comes with it and to think about how we go about improving organ donation, alongside considering what my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central set out on the principle of an opt-out system.

Currently, we know of two countries in which opt-out organ donation systems work: Wales, which we heard quite a bit about today, and Spain. As we heard, Scotland is also considering how it can introduce an opt-out scheme. In Wales, the system was brought in via the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act 2013, which came into force in 2015. The new law sets out that those who live and die in Wales will be deemed to have given consent for their organs to be used unless they have explicitly said otherwise—that is the opt-out.

According to the Organ Donation Wales website, a public awareness campaign before the change in the law came into effect resulted in the numbers of organs transplanted increasing from 120 to 160. NHS organ donation statistics have shown an 11.8% increase between 2014-15 and 2016-17 in people in Wales opting in to donate their organs—the highest increase among England, Wales and Scotland. However, a written answer from the Minister present today, based on NHS Blood and Transplant figures, stated that

“there has been no notable change in Welsh deceased donation figures since the change in legislation”.

This is backed up by NHS organ donation statistics, which show that despite the opt-out system in Wales, there were more deceased organ donors in England and Scotland. That could be because the system is still in its early days; people who have not opted out are still alive and have not yet been able to donate their organs.

Further afield, our friends in Spain have had a soft opt-out system since 1979, in which consent is presumed in the absence of any known objection by the deceased, but family consent is still sought. The implementation of that system led to a small increase in organ donation and transplant, but there was a dramatic increase after 1989 when the Spanish Government made a big push to reorganise organ donation, as a result of which there was a medically trained transplant co-ordinator in every hospital by 1999. However, as a 2012 British Medical Association report stated, there are likely to be differences between the UK and Spain’s performance on organ donation because of their different approaches to resources and clinical practices. For example, Spain has a higher number of intensive care beds, different ICU admissions criteria and end-of-life practices, and the use of higher-risk donors in comparison with those used here.

Nevertheless, those two examples give us food for thought on the change in organ donation rules in England. They show that if we implement this policy, we need to get it right. It is important that we learn from what has already happened, adapting and using what we learn from other countries to get it right in this country. I hope the Minister and her officials will be busy doing that after the debate.

Labour will set three tests for the Government if any new organ donation system is introduced in England. First, they must obviously ensure full public awareness of any change in the organ donation rules. Secondly, they must ensure that medical and healthcare professionals are involved in designing any changes to the system and that they have the support to raise awareness among the public. Thirdly, they must promise to work closely with community groups to ensure that cultural and religious views are fully consulted on and taken into account before any change is introduced. Those three tests are based on work done in other countries, notably Spain and Wales, but also on the current situation

across the UK, where there have been documented issues with engaging with BME communities on organ donation.

Organ donation and transplantation is a sensitive issue, as we have heard in this debate. Many people have strong and differing opinions on it, and it is crucial that the Government ensure that all voices are listened to so that we can come up with a solution. These real problems must be addressed. We know of many people who are on transplant waiting lists for far too long. Sometimes people die because they have been on the waiting list for years without a match to save their lives. We need considered action by the Minister and the Government. They must look at the issue carefully, consult with the public, ensure that solutions are found and bring about the improvements needed. I trust that the Minister will endeavour to do just that.

4.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I thank all Members who have participated in this debate. Organ donation has been such an established practice in the NHS for quite some years that we often forget about it. The way that everyone has brought the subject to life today, with references to their own stories and experiences, has reminded all of us how important it is. Perhaps it is time this subject had some renewed focus, if only to raise awareness and encourage people to opt in, whether or not we ultimately introduce an opt-out system.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). He could not have done a better service to his constituents Joe Dale and Max Johnson in the way he expressed his argument with considerable persuasion. Perhaps through him, I could send my good wishes to Joe Dale’s family. I hope they get some comfort from the fact that Joe lives on by giving life to others. As we know, one organ donor can save or transform up to nine lives. What better legacy can we have than for other people to live on? We, as Members of Parliament, could perhaps be more proactive in giving that message, as we breathe life into this much neglected subject.

I am told that we last considered organ donation on the Floor of the House in 2014. This opportunity to discuss it is very welcome, and we will have many more opportunities, given the confirmation from the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) that he will use his private Member’s Bill to push this issue forward. I am sure it will get a good airing.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) presented tests at the end of her speech for what we should bear in mind when deciding what to do in this space. I think we should do all those things, in any case, as we talk about kidney donation. The key has to be public awareness and ensuring that medical professionals do their bit to encourage people to participate in organ donation. We must also engage with community groups where there is a specific problem. That is my biggest priority.

I want to say a bit more about the context. Obviously, we want to encourage as many people as possible to make clear their intention to donate after death and to have that conversation with their families. That is often where the decision is made. Medical professionals need the requisite training to have these sensitive conversations.

[*Jackie Doyle-Price*]

As the hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned, not many people understand the system of organ donation. We can all sign up to be on the donor register, but not all of us will be in a position for our organs to be used. Quite often, organs can be used after an unexpected and traumatic death, and it is very difficult for any medical professional to have a conversation with the family about what should happen to the deceased's organs. We need to have a lot more understanding and be a lot more willing to make it clear to our loved ones that we would want our organs to be donated if we were ever unfortunately in that position.

I must pay tribute to all those in the national health service who work in this area. Their determination and commitment makes donation and transplantation possible. Although we still need more transplants, we have seen a significant increase in donations in the UK. We saw 1,413 donors giving 3,712 transplants in the last year, which illustrates how many lives can be saved by one successful approach to donation.

It is incredible that, as NHS Blood and Transplant told us only this week, more than 50,000 people are now alive thanks to organ donation and transplantation. The first transplants took place in my lifetime, and they were seen as revolutionary. One reason we have not given this subject as much attention is that donations now tend to be seen as commonplace.

There is much to celebrate, but there is also much more to do, not least because 457 people died last year while on the active transplant waiting list. That ignores the 875 people who were removed from the list because they had become too ill to receive a transplant. Many of those will have died shortly afterwards. At any one time some 6,500 people are on the waiting list, and again, although waiting times are declining, we cannot be complacent. We need to make sure that those people have hope that, when they are on the list, they have a realistic chance of receiving a transplant.

Our biggest challenge is black, Asian and minority ethnic donors, for two reasons. First, black and Asian people are more at risk of illnesses that may require a transplant, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, and secondly, the consent rate for those communities is half that of the white population. The same is true for blood, so we need many more blood donors from the black community. There is a constant need for that because of the prevalence of sickle cell anaemia, but we know that only 1% of the nation's blood donors are black. So we need to do much more not only in organ donation but in blood donation.

There is some encouraging news. Last year, more than 6.4% of all deceased donors were from black and Asian communities. That is a significant increase, so the direction of travel is positive, but we need to do much more. Average waiting times for kidney transplants have fallen for everyone, and that rise in donations from black and Asian communities has meant that the biggest fall in waiting times is for black and Asian patients—down from four years to two and a half over the past seven years. The direction of travel is good, but we need to do more, because people from black and Asian communities still wait at least six months longer than white patients. That problem needs to be tackled, because recipients are matched according to blood and tissue types, which differ across ethnic groups.

As we set out in our manifesto, we are determined to target that audience, and we welcome the involvement of all hon. Members in that. We are looking at other partner agencies, and we are working with the National Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Transplant Alliance. However, many other groups need to be engaged, not least to tackle misplaced cultural concerns about donation. It is not incompatible with Christian beliefs to bequeath one's organs, and we need to make sure that that message gets out loud and clear by engaging with all community leaders in this space.

We have heard some persuasive arguments on opt-outs and why we should move towards an opt-out system, and I certainly understand the thinking behind that proposal. To add my personal experience of this, my constituent Patricia Carroll regularly lobbies me on the subject. Her daughter Natalie suffered from anorexia and diabetes, and died awaiting a kidney and pancreas transplant. Patricia tried to donate her own kidney to Natalie but was not a match. Following Natalie's death, she decided to become a live donor. Last year—I think it was around Christmas—she gave a kidney to a 22-year-old young man called Joe who had been on dialysis for three or four years.

What Patricia has done for that family—it is the family, not just the individual—has transformed their lives. I again pay tribute to all live donors. That is an incredibly altruistic thing to do when recognising the impact it can have on the donor's own health. It is amazing, particularly when there are donors who have absolutely no personal relationship with the beneficiary of their organ. Patricia will be watching with interest to see what I have to say about this.

There are obvious attractions to opt-outs as a tool; anything that will increase the pool of available organs will obviously be attractive. However, opt-outs on their own are not a panacea, and the references to what we can learn from Spain are significant. The issue is about what is wrapped around that. Specifically, it is not just about public understanding and public awareness of why we need donation and what it means, but about how the medical profession deals with it.

The crucial point that affects donation is the conversation in the room between medical professionals and bereaved families. We have seen examples of families refusing consent because they are not convinced that their relatives wanted to donate and it feels safer to say no. Equally, we have seen that being overruled. We find that the highest rates of donation are achieved when we have specially trained nurses who have that conversation with the family in a sensitive way. When such conversations take place, rates of donation go up significantly. Those conversations are critical. If we look at the experience of Spain, we see that that injection of medical advice achieved the step change in donation rates, over and above having an opt-out system.

None the less, we are interested to see the experience in Wales. We are certainly prepared to consider that, and obviously we need to consider it sooner than we might have intended, given the private Member's Bill, but opt-out will never be a silver bullet to achieve more donation. We are committed to ensuring that we do whatever we can to increase donation. Our strategy, "Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020", contained the ambitious targets that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned. Although we have not actually achieved

the 70% that we are aiming for, the direction of travel is positive. The fact that more than 23.5 million people have opted in to donate their organs is quite an achievement, although I am not complacent. To give credit where credit is due, the NHS and everybody involved have achieved a great deal in achieving those figures.

The key thing is the availability of specialist nurses. We must ensure that organ donation is embedded as a normal consideration of end-of-life care, where that is available. We have looked at developing a new organ donor register that makes it easier for people to opt in. We are trying to make available as many opportunities as possible for people to do that, for example when people sign up for a new driving licence. In any interaction with Government, we need to give people that option, because where it is a positive choice, it is more likely to be effective.

Jim Shannon: We all agree about the need to raise awareness on the mainland and across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. When it comes to raising awareness—I presume the Minister will do so imminently—will she engage with the Northern Ireland Assembly, provided that it is still going, and with Scotland and Wales to ensure that we have a UK-wide programme of awareness to get people on the register?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. He might have seen that I am wearing a pin, which is a nice pink heart that says, “Yes”. That campaign is being run by NHSBT to highlight the need for people to offer to be a donor. If people are prepared to do it, they should wear this nice pin. We need to use any number of the tools at our disposal, and we need to be a lot more imaginative about the ones we use. I look forward to seeing him with his nice pink heart.

I should conclude my remarks to allow the hon. Member for Barnsley Central an opportunity to respond to the debate. I think that we are all united in the outcome we are trying to achieve, which is to encourage more people to be willing to donate their organs to achieve more transplants. With regard to the tools we employ to achieve that, we will look at opt-out and consider whether that would do anything, but in the meantime we are prioritising engagement with black and minority ethnic communities. We will continue to invest in specialised nursing to have those very sensitive conversations, because they need to happen. We will look at what more we can do to encourage more families to be willing to give consent at the time it needs to be given. I thank everyone for contributing to the debate.

4.24 pm

Dan Jarvis: This has been a constructive and useful debate, and I am grateful that we have had contributions from Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England. The reality, as the Minister said, is that this is a serious, sensitive and complex subject, but ultimately it is about saving lives.

It was a great privilege to meet Max Johnson’s mother yesterday, and I pay tribute to the Johnson family for their stoicism and the fact that they are prepared to talk about their experiences. Speaking as a parent, I can only imagine how difficult it must be for them. Today, Max Johnson sits in hospital in Newcastle, waiting and urgently hoping that an organ donation will be made available to him.

As I said in my opening remarks, we all have a responsibility to do everything we can. We have a duty of care to people more generally, and that particularly includes those who require some form of donation. We can learn a lot from what is happening across Europe and in Wales. I am delighted that there are moves afoot to move to a similar system in Scotland.

I was obviously very pleased to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) will be introducing a private Member’s Bill, which will have its First Reading next week and its Second Reading at some point in the autumn. That provides a valuable opportunity for us in this House to have a further discussion.

As the Minister again rightly said, there is no silver bullet solution. If the Government were to be persuaded that moving to an opt-out system was the right thing to do, that would have to be accompanied by a range of other measures, not least further publicity to raise awareness so that, collectively, we can all encourage people to sign up and be organ donors.

I am not prone to making predictions, but I will say, in conclusion, that I think that at some point we will move to an opt-out system in England. It is my strong belief and hope that we do that sooner rather than later, because I am confident that to do so would save countless lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the introduction of an opt-out system for organ donation in England.

4.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 July 2017

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Anglo-Polish Relations

9.30 am

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Anglo-Polish relations.

I am grateful to be speaking in this important debate. My family and I left Poland and came to the United Kingdom in 1978, because of communism. My parents were staunchly anti-communist and refused to live under the tyranny of communism, but after martial law it was impossible to return, and we had to see our family, friends and fellow citizens suffering under the oppression of the Jaruzelski regime. I returned for the first time after the lifting of martial law, in 1983. I spent many summers with my beloved Polish grandfather, listening to his experiences and hearing of the suffering that he and his family and his generation went through during the terrible times of the second world war, and the horrendous brutality and destruction in Warsaw from 1939 to 1945. I also listened to his experiences of living under a communist system, with the terrible lack of freedom that ensued from that.

I am very proud of being the first ever Polish-born British Member of Parliament. Although there are other Members with relatives from Poland, I am the only one to have actually been born there, and I am proud of my unpronounceable surname. When I first stood to be on the Conservative candidates list someone said to me, “You will never be elected with a completely unpronounceable surname like that. You’ve got to change it or anglicise it”—as many others have done. I said, “In that case, I will never stand for Parliament, because I am very proud of my Polish roots.” Once during the selection process someone said to me: “Kawasaki—that’s not a very Shropshire name, is it? How are you going to get by with a name like that?” I said, “Well, it didn’t cause my grandfather’s generation any problems when they were fighting in the battle of Britain, so I hope it won’t cause me any problems today.”

I am proud of the fact that this debate is taking place at the same time as the royal visit to Warsaw, which accentuates the increasing importance of Poland as a European economy and a trading partner for the United Kingdom—as well as a defence partner for our country. Let us not forget that while we grapple with encouraging many of our NATO partners to spend the prerequisite 2% of GDP on defence, Poland is already doing so. In fact, it plans to increase defence spending beyond the 2% margin. However, differences are opening up between Poland and Germany—the two countries that the royal couple are visiting this week—with respect to their vision for the European Union and its component parts, and what authority it should have over sovereign nation states. I hope to get the Minister’s perspective on the differences that are starting to materialise between Warsaw and Berlin.

This year we celebrate the 77th anniversary of the battle of Britain, and I was proud last year to accompany Lord Tebbit, a man for whom I have enormous respect, to the RAF Club to celebrate the 76th anniversary. He and I, along with many senior Polish military officers and their British counterparts, had a wonderful dinner. In his speech Lord Tebbit—who, we should not forget, served in the RAF—said something that resonated enormously with me and will stay with me for the rest of my life. He said that in the summer of 1940 the balance between the Luftwaffe and the RAF was so even, and the outcome of that key battle was so uncertain, that it was unequivocally the arrival of the Poles, the largest foreign contingent in the battle of Britain, that tipped the balance in favour of the British side. Although the debate is about current Anglo-Polish relations, we must never forget the extraordinary contribution that those brave men undertook on our behalf to save our country. We must always celebrate that and teach our children and grandchildren about it. Although their country had been taken over by tyranny, they did not give up. They did not just lie back and take it. They continued their struggle against fascism by coming to the United Kingdom and fighting with us.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman’s points are extremely important. The contribution and enormous sacrifice made by the Polish people means that they have the support of every proud member of this nation.

The inquest on the suicide of Dagmara Przybysz opened yesterday. That bright, intelligent young woman committed suicide because she was bullied for being Polish. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the points he has made should be disseminated as widely as possible, so that no one will ever again be bullied for being Polish? They should instead be praised for it.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. My right hon. Friend the Minister drew to my attention a newspaper article about that beautiful young Polish girl, who was found hanged in school as a result of being bullied by a racist gang.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Daniel Kawczynski: I am going to make some progress, but then I will give way.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) is of course correct, and that is why the Polish war memorial is important. Such visible signs of the contribution of Poles to the United Kingdom are important, because we must explain to younger generations why so many Poles are here. Many are here because they came to continue the fight against fascism, and then stayed here as part of the community. No one accentuates the importance of that better than Senator Anders, whom I am sure the hon. Member for Ealing North has met. She is the daughter of the esteemed General Władysław Anders, who was an important figure for Poland. Not only is she the senator for Suwalki area, where British troops are deployed at the moment, but she has been appointed as a special roving ambassador to engage with the Polish diaspora around the world and commemorate and recognise their contributions to their host nations. I pay tribute to her, because Poland needs recognition for its unique contributions.

[*Daniel Kawczynski*]

An area of dissent in the European Union is refugees. Poland has recently taken more than 1.3 million refugees from the terrible fighting in Ukraine. My Polish friends tell me that there are now 1.3 million Ukrainians in employment in Poland, but some figures put the number of Ukrainians in Poland as high as 1.5 million or 1.7 million. On my summer holidays to the Polish seaside resort of Sopot, where I go every year, I see for myself the huge number of Ukrainians working in restaurants and cafés, and throughout the community.

Poland is not demanding a resettlement of those Ukrainians or any special help from the European Union in dealing with those huge numbers of refugees streaming across her border. In fact, Poland has already done a great deal to help and support those refugees in escaping the fighting and difficulties they have experienced in Ukraine, yet Germany and the European Union are now talking about sanctions against Poland for not taking the requisite number of Syrian refugees. I find that dangerous and frightening, quite frankly. We have a history of welcoming refugees to our nation, and we are proud of that, but that decision must come from the grassroots. It must bubble up from society, as happens in our country.

What frightens me is the idea that the European Union can somehow unilaterally dictate an allocation of certain types of refugee to be distributed to Poland, against the express wishes of the democratically elected Polish Government. The issue is clearly polarising, but we must respect the will of the Polish Government. I consider one European country or the European Union itself threatening sanctions to be blackmail and intimidation, and the United Kingdom must support Poland on the issue. The referendum showed that no matter what happens with the European Union, we believe in the supremacy of individual sovereign nations and their ability to be directly accountable to their people for all policies that they implement.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the same defence could be made of countries such as Jordan and Turkey, which have already accepted far more refugees than they can sustainably look after? If the United Kingdom was prepared to take a decent number of refugees from Syria and Iraq, instead of putting pressure on countries in the middle east to take more, would there not be less pressure on places such as Poland, which is already catering for refugees from other parts of the world?

Daniel Kawczynski: I do not really want to get into a debate about our domestic immigration policies. I am proud that the United Kingdom has provided more money than any country apart from America for refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, but of course we can do more.

A key point that I want to raise with the Minister is that because we are leaving the European Union, people say to me, “What’s it got to do with you? Your power and influence in the European Union is bound to wane over the next two years, and then you will have no influence at all.” One Conservative MP said to me today, “You’re blowing in the wind here; we will not have any influence in the European Union.” But the

fact remains that we will of course continue to have influence. As a major European power, security, stability, peace and confidence on the European continent is vital to us, and we must continue to engage and support countries such as Poland on this issue and others.

I say to the Minister that when Germany behaves in such a way, it needs to be called out for double standards. On the one hand Germany talks about the unique importance of solidarity within the European Union, and says that there has to be redistribution of refugees around the whole of the European Union, but on the other hand it implements policies that go completely against that concept. One example is the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—a massive project to build an undersea gas and oil pipeline from St Petersburg to Germany, completely bypassing the whole of central and eastern Europe. We all understand and appreciate the importance of energy security for all our NATO partners in central and eastern Europe. They are building liquefied gas terminals on the Baltic sea and starting to buy more gas from Qatar and the United States of America, but a common energy policy with the Russians is needed. The Russians understand only strength, and any differences between those countries will give Russia increased leverage to turn off the taps or to put pressure on some of those countries if things do not go its way.

I am really disappointed by Germany’s conduct over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, and I very much hope that my right hon. Friend and other Ministers will raise the issue with their German counterparts. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his German counterpart to highlight concerns about the lack of support for central and eastern Europe on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline? As I said, it is vital for our interests that countries in central and eastern Europe and the Baltic states continue to have energy security.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) still wish to intervene? I was rude not to give way to my constituency neighbour from just across the border in Wales. I give way to him.

Glyn Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene and to express my admiration for the Polish people. A huge number of Polish people have moved to my constituency and, I am sure, to many others. They work incredibly hard and are committed to their families—that is their reputation—all on top of the commitment that those of us of a certain age know they made to the freedom of our country in the last war. We in Montgomeryshire have great admiration for the Polish people. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the speech he is making.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend for those kind remarks.

Another key issue for our Polish friends is the need for a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland. I will be the first in the debate to recognise the contribution that the United Kingdom has already made in sending rotational troops to the Suwalki gap. We are all proud that more than 150 British soldiers from the Light Dragoons are in Poland playing their role in sending a strong message to the Russians that the new demarcation line between NATO and Russia is there to stay and must not be infringed, and that the United Kingdom will never tolerate any infringement on the sovereignty of our

NATO partners in central and eastern Europe. I am sure that is a red line for every hon. Member in this Chamber and throughout the entire House of Commons and House of Lords.

We are all scarred by the terrible consequences for Poland of the Yalta conference—being imprisoned behind the iron curtain for 60 years—and of the initial attack on 1 September 1939. I am particularly scarred, if I may say so, after listening to my beloved grandfather speak of those consequences. It will take generations to forget and forgive what happened at that time. However, we must now show the Poles that we are resolute, and that our word is our bond when it comes to upholding the article 5 clauses in the NATO treaty that guarantee Poland's sovereignty and independence.

I have asked many questions on the Floor of the House about the steps the Government will take to be at the vanguard of pushing for a permanent NATO base in Poland. I have had various oral replies, none of which have been satisfactory. The answer from Ministers is, “That is a decision for NATO.” Of course it is, but we have an opportunity to show our Polish friends and allies that we are at the forefront of understanding their requests for a permanent NATO base. We ought to use our senior position within that organisation to push very hard to ensure that there is a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland. We need to take the lead on this issue.

We also need to take the lead in trying to alleviate tensions with Russia and on the Minsk II agreements, which have so far been prioritised and led by France and Germany. I was recently discussing with a Conservative colleague why we did not get involved initially in the Minsk I and II agreements. As a major European power, we clearly have a duty and responsibility to join Germany and France in trying to resolve the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which are a major source of instability in central and eastern Europe.

When I was debating with German Members of Parliament at the Royal United Services Institute last week, I challenged them on the German stance with regard to permanent NATO bases in Poland. I have to say that I did not get unequivocal support from them; they are rather sitting on the fence. The Minister may correct me if I am wrong, but I do not believe the Germans want a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland. They are happy with the main focus of NATO being in Germany and protecting Germany. The only NATO base in Poland at the moment is right on the Polish-German border, in Szczecin, so if there were any incursion, only a tiny bit of Poland would potentially be protected.

The Germans and Angela Merkel have a long-standing relationship with President Putin. Angela Merkel probably has the greatest understanding of the Russian President, speaking Russian and having known and negotiated with him for a long time, but we in the United Kingdom need to challenge the Germans on that issue. Yes, we must have dialogue with the Russians and co-operate with them, but we need to ensure at the same time that there is a carrot-and-stick approach to them, and part of that must be a permanent NATO base in Poland.

I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will shortly wrap up my comments, but the other point I want to raise with the Minister is that we must fight, along with our Polish friends, not to tolerate

a single European army in the post-Brexit world. We all remember the picture of Signor Renzi, Mrs Merkel and Monsieur Hollande standing on top of an Italian aircraft carrier stating that they wanted a single European army. Some people on the continent even say that they can no longer depend on the British and Americans for a security umbrella for Europe. That is very wrong and very dangerous, and nothing must happen to usurp the power and responsibility of NATO as a collective defence mechanism for the whole continent.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree—it appears he is on the same line—that the security of Europe in the past, the present and hopefully the future, even in the central European belt, has been thanks to NATO, and that we should build and strengthen our relationship with all the NATO nations and not allow the misreading of history that says the European Union cemented peace, when it was in fact NATO?

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. In the referendum campaign in Shrewsbury, one couple came up to me and said, “I’m going to vote for remain because the European Union has maintained peace in Europe over the last 60 years,” and I had to spend the next 15 minutes explaining very succinctly that it is nothing to do with the European Union. What has kept peace in Europe in our time, thank God, has been that collective defence mechanism—anchored, I have to say, by support from the Americans and the Canadians. Undoubtedly many very important countries are part of that defence mechanism, such as Norway and Turkey, which in my view are unlikely to become members of the European Union. It is very important that those countries—in addition to America, Canada and the United Kingdom, which is pulling out of the European Union—are central to the collective defence capability that we all require.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman: we must trumpet the importance of NATO. We must also work with our Polish friends to ensure that they take the lead within the European Union in ensuring that, although the United Kingdom is pulling out of the EU, NATO continues to be supreme as the sole common defence umbrella for the whole continent.

I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the 900,000 Poles who are living in the United Kingdom. Prince William said yesterday in his speech in Warsaw that Polish is now the second most spoken language in the United Kingdom.

Glyn Davies: Not Welsh?

Daniel Kawczynski: I hear my hon. Friend from across the border mentioning Welsh, but he will have to take that dispute up with Prince William directly.

I have a wonderful Polish teacher who is helping me with my Polish grammar, Mrs Watrobska, to whom I would like to pay tribute. I spend the first 15 minutes of every lesson, every week, complaining about how difficult and unnecessarily complicated the Polish language is. She just listens to me and keeps faith, but I am finally getting to grips with the rather complicated Polish grammar.

[*Daniel Kawczynski*]

One statistic that I want to share with the Minister is that 87,000 companies have now been set up in the United Kingdom by the Polish diaspora. I would argue that these people are, in the main, ideal immigrants. If we were to design a newcomer to our country, it would be a Pole. They are highly educated and highly skilled people. Many of them have finished university education, and they have an extraordinary work ethic. It makes me so proud when so many people come up to me, knowing that I am from Poland—whether it is farmers in Shropshire or people in the building trade, construction, architecture, design or fashion—to say, “We love these Polish workers. They are dependable; we can rely upon them.”

Of course that makes me very proud, and that is the sentiment. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will agree that British people appreciate Poles and the contribution that these very hard-working people make to our country. Many of them have expressed to me concerns about their rights in a post-Brexit world and in the transition we are going through. This Government wanted to settle the issue of the reciprocal rights of EU citizens—both theirs and ours—at the very forefront, before negotiations started, understanding the importance of getting the issue resolved as a priority. Unfortunately, Mr Tusk and Angela Merkel prevented us from doing that.

The Government now have a very effective and positive plan to ensure that these people have guarantees to stay in the United Kingdom, and I am sure that the Minister will allude to those guarantees when he makes his speech. Let us not forget—this is the strongest message I want to give to our Polish friends—that just because we are pulling out of the European Union, it does not mean we will not continue to encourage highly-skilled Polish workers to come to our country. We will continue to celebrate their contribution to our economy and we will continue to issue work permits to highly-skilled Polish workers who wish to come here, work and make a contribution to our society.

I now turn to the newspaper article that my right hon. Friend the Minister highlighted to me, about a young Polish girl, Dagmara, of just 16. I am not in the habit of showing newspaper articles; I hope I am not infringing any official rules, Sir Roger. I shall put it down.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. It is not welcomed by the Chair because *Hansard*, of course, cannot see the articles to which the hon. Gentleman is referring, but he is more than free to quote from them.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am very sorry, Sir Roger. I wanted the camera to pick up the face of this beautiful young Polish girl who so sadly died, hanged, following a racist incident.

Having come from Poland myself, I have to say that I personally have experienced nothing but kindness and understanding. I find it amazing and gratifying that, even as a foreigner to this country, I have been elected to the House of Commons. That obviously says a lot about my constituents. However, there have been some reported cases of racism against Poles, and it is obviously sickening and very worrying. I would like to assure our Polish friends that the Government—I am sure the Minister will agree with this—are doing everything

possible not only to punish in the severest way those who are responsible, but, through our schools programme and other measures, to ensure that people are aware of the extraordinary contribution that Polish people make to our country and why we all welcome them to our shores.

I would like to touch on the extraordinary number of British investments that are taking place in Poland. Tesco, which was initially inceptioned by a Polish immigrant to this country, as I am sure hon. Members know, now operates widely across Poland. There is also GlaxoSmithKline. In the financial services sector, Aviva is making great progress. I pay tribute on the record to the Polish Ministries that are working in a very collaborative, professional and effective way, not only in supporting British companies but by helping them better to understand regulations and by listening to feedback from British multinational companies about some of the problems that they have faced and taking them on board when it comes to reforms. My understanding is that the Polish Government are very serious about creating a pro-business approach. Poland is open for business, and they are very keen to attract as much British investment as possible.

I would, however, like to highlight for the Minister one case and concern that I have come across. A British company called EuroEco Fuels, in the biofuels industry, operates in the port of Szczecin. I heard from various colleagues that it was having enormous problems with the port of Szczecin authorities. I do not have enough time to give a significant explanation of some of the red tape and, the company argues, infringements against them by the port of Szczecin authorities, but so grave were my concerns that I took the time to visit the company earlier this year to see at first hand what its problems were. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade and Investment has written to his counterparts in Warsaw. Unfortunately, the situation is not yet resolved. I wanted this Minister to know of that particular problem; I wanted to highlight it to him and his ministerial colleagues to see whether they can do anything to help EuroEco Fuels with its ongoing and highly controversial deliberations and concerns with the port of Szczecin authorities.

I think that we need a permanent prime ministerial trade envoy to Poland. The Minister will need to find someone very senior from the House of Lords or someone—

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Who speaks Polish!

Daniel Kawczynski: No, I am not referring to myself; the Government need someone with much more gravitas and experience than me. But I am serious. Prime ministerial trade envoys are doing a great job in countries such as Iran and Indonesia—the Minister will know that our hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) does a very good job there. We do not have a trade envoy for Poland, yet we are Poland’s second largest trading partner. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Government consider appointing a trade envoy to Poland, so that all of us who are interested in bilateral trading relations with Poland can get behind that man or woman and help them to make the United Kingdom Poland’s No. 1 trading partner. We are currently its second

largest trading partner after Germany. I see no reason why, over the next 20 years, we cannot become Poland's No. 1 trading partner.

As long as I am a Member of this House—I have been one for 12 years now—I will always do whatever I can to promote relations with Poland. I say this as someone who was born in that country and who loves that country, its culture and its history very much. I feel that our two countries are inextricably linked and that we are very important bilateral strategic partners, and I for one look forward to our relations with Poland going from strength to strength over the coming years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Four hon. Gentlemen wish to speak, and I propose to start calling the Front Benchers at 10.30, so do the maths.

10.6 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The maths is fairly easy to work out, Sir Roger; thank you. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on setting the scene so well. His knowledge of Poland is second to none in the House, and we appreciate his contribution to the debate.

We all know about the very significant Polish community in the UK. There are the Polish nationals who have come to the UK since Poland joined the EU in 2004, but there already existed a very large and significant Polish community in the UK—they came around the time of the second world war—and that is why I wanted to speak on this issue. I am the MP for Strangford, and we have a large contingent of Polish people who have lived in the constituency for a great many years; they came here originally during the second world war. The 1951 UK census showed that the number of Polish-born immigrants had quadrupled since before the war, to more than 160,000.

As I said, the history with Northern Ireland dates back to world war two. Polish people integrated well with the local population. People in my constituency have passed down fond memories of the Polish brigade stationed in Ballyhalbert at the 315 Squadron base. Just last year, we had a commemorative event at the watchtower in Ballyhalbert, which was much used in the second world war. Today, as the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, Prince William and Kate are on their visit to Poland. They were very careful not to mention Brexit; I think that was a great idea—when in Rome, do not annoy the Romans. It is important that we have that relationship, which we hope will continue to grow after we leave the EU.

The Polish people are remembered for their manners and politeness and their sheer determination, even though they were based in Northern Ireland, to fight against the Nazis who invaded Poland. The 38th Irish Brigade also fought alongside the Polish brigades in the assault at Monte Cassino. It is good to know that the bonds forged in war have remained strong locally. That has been enhanced through the reputation of the local Poles as hard-working decent people. Some of those Poles married local girls back in the second world war, and Polish names can be found through the Ards peninsula and where I live. About 1.4 million eastern Europeans

live in Britain. That includes 916,000 Polish people, and 80% of them are in work, so they come with a work ethic. Those are the figures according to the most complete official picture so far. A Polish shop opened a couple of years ago just a couple of doors up from my advice centre. Again, that is an indication of the presence of the Polish population and those who want to enjoy foods from back home.

A study of migration from the eight eastern European countries known as the EU8, conducted by the Office for National Statistics, shows that Lithuanians are the second largest group in the United Kingdom. The ONS study confirms that the food product manufacturing industry is particularly dependent on migrants, with EU8 citizens making up 25% of the total workforce. In my area, in the agri-food sectors, the importance of Poles and eastern Europeans to the workforce is enormous. We need to ensure that that continues.

The latest figures from the ONS are that in 2015 an estimated 831,000 residents of the UK were born in Poland, and an estimated 916,000 residents have Polish nationality. A 2013 analysis by the ONS of the 2011 census reported that Polish—here I have to disagree with my friend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies)—was the most spoken language in the UK after English. If the ONS says that, who am I to disagree? It refers to people who describe Polish as their main language.

As the briefing paper for the debate set out, in December 2016 the inaugural UK-Poland intergovernmental consultations were held in London; that was the first time the two Governments had held a “structured, comprehensive dialogue at Cabinet level.”

We welcome that. They agreed a series of collaborative measures on defence, foreign policy, security, business and the economy and science and innovation. The bilateral deployment of 150 soldiers within Enhanced Forward Presence, which has been mentioned, is good news.

The Governments also agreed to sign a defence co-operation treaty—let us be clear that it will not be like 1939; we will hold to and enhance this one—to strengthen UK-Polish industry co-operation, to co-ordinate opportunities to support the growth of UK and Polish small businesses, to showcase UK-Polish research collaboration, to increase academic exchange and to continue to co-operate to tackle global challenges including energy security, counter-terrorism and cyber-crime. They agreed to broaden and deepen our country-to-country dialogue by establishing an annual British-Polish civil society forum in 2017, bringing together UK and Polish academia, businesses and think-tanks to enhance the vibrant Polish community in the UK, including in my constituency.

I will conclude, because I am conscious that others want to speak. There will clearly be an opportunity to foster relations after Brexit. It is essential that we do so, especially on defence strategies, building on the history of our two nations. It can and should be done, inside or outside Europe, whatever the case may be. That is the feeling coming from Polish Government officials, and it is clear that the Brexit Minister is aware of and working on it. I encourage him and everyone here, including this Minister, to keep the House aware of the relationship between the two nations and enable it to grow.

10.11 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I think my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) missed out from his list of trade envoys our brilliant trade envoy to Nigeria—I cannot imagine who has that job. I just refresh his memory on that.

I, too, will start with a history lesson, although not one that goes back as far as the second world war. Let me go back to the time of Mrs Thatcher and the setting up of what became known as the Know How Fund, Britain's technical assistance programme to central and eastern Europe. The fund, of which I was a board member, started in Poland, because the British Government saw the attractions of Poland and the innate spirit of entrepreneurial activity there, and decided that they would work with individual Polish organisations—not governmental organisations—to take reforms forward. I spent many years afterwards doing non-exciting things such as trying to import British accounting, law and stock exchange and banking practices to Poland, with some great success. That is why so many British companies feel comfortable doing business in Poland now.

Daniel Kawczynski: Of course I recognise the role that my hon. Friend undertakes as the excellent trade envoy for Nigeria. I agree wholeheartedly about the initial support that Britain gave to Poland after the communist era in the form of technology transfer and support in setting up institutions. He will, of course, agree that Britain was at the forefront of ensuring that the Paris Club nations rescinded many of Poland's communist era debts.

John Howell: I agree. The point that I would make is that it is a fundamentally good way of transferring British technical assistance, for the benefit of both countries, as it transpires. It makes the other countries much more receptive and makes it easier for British companies to operate there, and it certainly improves the activities in those countries.

The involvement with Poland goes back more years than I care to remember, but it has not stopped there. I still have a great deal of involvement with Poland and Polish MPs. It is worth remembering that Poland supplies many Members of Parliament to the European Conservatives Group at the Council of Europe. In a post-Brexit world, the Council of Europe goes far beyond the 27 EU members, with a full membership of 47. That says a lot about the Council's interest in human rights, democracy and the rule of law. I have heard Polish members of the Council of Europe participate in many debates on refugees, and I know full well that they understand the needs of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Europe, because they have said so in public debate. The point that they make balances good practice across Europe and seeing the refugee pattern as a whole with keeping an eye on what Poland can take for itself.

My hon. Friend mentioned that Prince William had been to Poland recently; Donald Trump was there as well, which led to many protests. There have also been protests about the court reforms that the current Polish Government are undertaking. Will the Minister comment on those? The difficulty with the court reforms, according to the opposition, is that the Government there are seeking more power over the courts, trying to end the separation of powers within Poland and introducing

more rules to allow members of courts to be chosen by parliamentarians. Is that compatible with the country's continued membership of the Council of Europe and its commitment to democracy?

My experience with Poland goes back many years, and I hope that it will continue for many more years to come. It is a place full of great entrepreneurs who contribute to our lives every day.

10.16 am

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is nice to have a positive discussion about Poles in this Chamber—not polls suggesting that Hillary Clinton could or could not have won; not polls suggesting that we will or will not stay in the European Union; not, dare I say, polls suggesting a landslide majority. Here is a positive debate that we parliamentarians can have about Poles in this country and the relationship between Poland and this United Kingdom of ours.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski)—indeed, my hon. Friend—who is chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Poland. On being elected to this House, he could have set aside any labels that people might attach to him, saying that he is just a constituency representative, but he stands up passionately and fervently for positive relations between this United Kingdom and Poland. I am sure that the Minister will give him due credit for the work that he undertakes in this House.

I have a number of points to direct to the Minister. I recognise that two of them probably do not fall within his bailiwick, but I hope that he will at least undertake to consider them. First, it is great news that for the first time, Belfast will have a permanent Polish consular service. A property is under construction at the moment, and for the first time, that service will be available to all the Polish nationals who have made Belfast their home.

It is appropriate to place on record our appreciation for the decades of dedicated service given by Jerome Mullen, honorary consul for Poland in Northern Ireland. He is a quiet champion who has often been thrust into difficult circumstances when there have been inter-community tensions. He has stood up passionately for Polish people in Northern Ireland and represented them. I hope that the Minister will take it upon himself to pay tribute to Jerome and the work that he has done in his capacity as an honorary consul and representative.

The battle of Britain has been mentioned. I think that it is appropriate to highlight that, whenever Polish airmen came to this country in exile, they were first offered the opportunity to serve under the British flag, wear British uniforms and participate as reservists only. Equipment was in short supply, but there is a wonderful story that the *Belfast Telegraph* set up a public fundraising campaign. The idea was to raise £7,500 to buy one Spitfire, but the campaign got £88,633 16s 5d and bought 17 Spitfires, including for the Polish airmen of the 315 Squadron—the Dębliniski squadron, which my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to. Those airmen served our country, their own country and their aspirations for Europe so well and so diligently. Their record pertains to this day.

I met a number of people during the election campaign who raised concerns about this country's decision to leave the European Union. I recognise that dealing with those concerns falls naturally to the Home Office, but as

part of fostering good relations, I think it is appropriate that I raise them today. One Polish national, who has been living in Belfast for 15 years, travels home every six weeks, flying through Birmingham under a Polish passport. Every time he re-enters Belfast, he is stopped to have his credentials checked. This is an EU national who has freedom of movement, travelling from one United Kingdom city, Birmingham, to another, Belfast. There is a constitutional issue when someone in his position is not allowed to go down the EU national route—the route we all use when we go on holiday—but is separated off and has to prove his credentials. That needs to be raised with Border Force and the Home Office.

The second concern is from a gentleman who has been a Belfast veterinarian for 10 years. He employs 13 people and has totally established residency in the city of Belfast.

Sir Alan Duncan: Just for clarification, could the hon. Gentleman explain his constituent's visa entry problem? If he is an EU citizen, he can go down the EU route. I am puzzled by the problem that the hon. Gentleman is explaining to the House.

Gavin Robinson: That is the conundrum. He should naturally go down the route for EU nationals, as we do when we go to Spain, Poland or anywhere else in the EU, but he is directed out of it as a Polish national. Whatever has happened since the decision to leave the European Union, he is being subjected to controls that I think are inappropriate—the Minister's response indicates that he agrees—and that need to be investigated.

An applicant for British citizenship needs to have held a residency card for one year. My office has been contacted by two constituents, Polish nationals who have been in Belfast for many years and have established businesses and families, because their applications for British citizenship were turned down even though they had held residency cards for a year. An unduly onerous constraint is being placed on people who have chosen the United Kingdom as their home, such as those two Polish nationals. They have chosen Belfast as their home, lived there for more than 10 years and attained residency cards. At the time when they were turned down for British citizenship, they met the criteria to be in this country.

As representatives of the people in this country, we need to resolve these niggling issues collectively, because we do not want leaving the European Union to be a bumpy ride. We want to make it as smooth as possible and build on the strong relations between the United Kingdom and Poland.

Daniel Kawczynski: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his role in the all-party group on Poland; he is a very active member of the group who has many Polish citizens living in his constituency. I thank him for his support and encourage him to come to the Belvedere Forum, which is hosted in Poland and brings together people from different walks of life to promote bilateral relations. I will talk to him about it another time, but I very much hope he gets involved.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): In the interests of time, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) may wish to treat that as a rhetorical intervention.

Gavin Robinson indicated assent.

10.24 am

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this important debate. I understand that its focus is on the future, but I hope I will be forgiven for using it as an opportunity to promote my constituency's shared history with Poland. As the Member for a Scottish constituency, I would have preferred the debate's title to refer to "British-Polish relations", but I will forgive my hon. Friend for that oversight.

There is a strong link between Scotland—particularly the area I represent in the Scottish borders—and Poland. After the fall of France in May 1940, the 1st Polish Armoured Division was established in Duns in my constituency. It trained in Berwickshire before taking part in the Normandy landings. After the war and the Communist takeover in Poland, many Polish soldiers in the west were unwilling to return to a country where their personal freedom was far from assured, so many settled in the UK, including a relatively large number in the Scottish borders. That link can still be seen today in the "Great Polish Map of Scotland", which was the brainchild of Polish war veteran Jan Tomaszik, who lived in Galashiels. It stands near Peebles, just outside my constituency, and is thought to be the world's largest terrain relief model.

Another famous Polish migrant was Wojtek, the beer-drinking, cigarette-eating, ammunition-carrying brown bear that was officially enlisted in the Polish army and fought in the Italian campaign before being stationed near Hutton in Berwickshire. In Duns, which is twinned with the Polish town of Żagań, a statue of Wojtek was unveiled by the mayor of Żagań last year after a blessing by a Polish priest. The statue stands as a reminder of the important link between our communities.

To this day, there remains a sizeable Polish community in the Scottish borders—around 1,300 people, according to the most recent census data. Their contribution cannot be overstated: they work hard, integrate well and add some cultural diversity to the borders. Hawick's Saturday Polish school, which offers courses to Polish and English-speaking adults, is a great example of how the community does well at integrating while maintaining and promoting its own culture. I know that there is some anxiety among the community about its future as the UK leaves the European Union. Ensuring that Poles continue to feel welcome here is an absolute necessity. I am pleased that securing the rights of EU migrants is one of the first priorities of the negotiations; I look forward to the situation being resolved as quickly as possible.

Looking to the future, there is much we can do to improve and build on the special relationship that the UK has with Poland. As one of the fastest-growing economies in the EU and one of our key allies, Poland will have an important role to play in the forthcoming negotiations. I am encouraged by the establishment of annual bilateral summits between the two countries, the first of which took place last year. The focus should be on pursuing the measures agreed at those meetings, particularly on defence co-operation, and further work to strengthen industry co-operation and small business growth in our two countries. It is clear that Poland recognises that our leaving the EU does not mean that our important trade and defence links should be compromised.

[John Lamont]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham again on securing this important debate, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to say a few remarks. I am confident that our relationship with Poland will continue to strengthen and will continue to be as positive as it has been in the past.

10.28 am

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to begin the winding-up speeches in this debate. To pick up on an earlier comment from the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), I wondered whether I would be allowed to take part in a debate on Angles and Poles. However, tracing the migration routes on a map apparently proves that when the Angles came over from northern Europe, those who turned north were known as the acute ones, while those who turned south were known as the obtuse ones. That may explain quite a lot.

I want to highlight two aspects of the debate. First, it reminds us of the critical and decisive role that Polish servicemen and women played in ensuring that the United Kingdom did not fall under Nazi rule in the 1940s. Second, it gives us the opportunity to celebrate the contribution of just a small number of Polish nationals and people of Polish descent in and around my constituency. We have heard a lot of reminders today about the part that Poland played during the second world war. I have to say that I think there has been a massive failing in how we have taught not only our children, but ourselves, the history of these islands.

During my relatively short time here in Parliament, I have heard MPs in the main Chamber talking about how Britain—or, sometimes, England—stood alone against the Nazi menace. The simple fact is that if Britain had stood alone, Britain would have fallen. The United Kingdom would not have stood up permanently against the force of the Nazis without the support of service people from Poland and many other countries.

Stephen Pound: The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important point. It seems that the links between Poland and this country, which were forged in blood—those links of fraternity and shared struggle—are so powerful that they can never be broken. Was he in the House when his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), spoke about the Clydebank blitz, when an entire section of a great city was flattened and the most potent response to the blitzkrieg was from Polish destroyers in the Clyde at the time, which were similar to the Błyskawiza, the destroyer that sunk the Bismarck? This connection between us and the Poles is far too strong ever to be threatened. Does he agree that we need to tell more people about this glorious, joyful, courageous, magnificent history of Poles in the UK?

Peter Grant: I am very grateful for that intervention; it means I can now take out several parts of my own speech.

Stephen Pound: Forgive me.

Peter Grant: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman made those comments more eloquently and probably more briefly than I would have done, so I am grateful to him.

We have already heard that it was a Polish squadron that was the best in the entire RAF at doing what the fighter squadrons were there to do, which was to shoot down Nazi aircraft. In the early 1940s, one in every six bomber crews in Bomber Command was Polish. In total, 19,000 Poles served in the RAF. The contribution that Poles made in helping to crack the Enigma code has already been highlighted. Poles also played a crucial role in taking Monte Cassino, it was the Poles who eventually sank the Bismarck, and the Poles were the only people to shoot down Luftwaffe bombers during the worst night of the blitz of Clydebank.

The list goes on and on, and those are only the parts of the history that we are allowed to know, because we can be certain that there were things done behind enemy lines that will never be made public—not even today—and there were also things done on the eastern side of Poland that the Soviets, who conquered the country after 1945, made sure were never, ever going to be told.

Perhaps the darkest of those stories, which has not been mentioned yet, is the deliberate massacre of 22,000 Polish soldiers—prisoners of war—under the direct orders of Stalin. It was an attempted genocide. The motive was to rid Poland of any potential leader, so that even after the war Poland would not be in a position to stand up to military conquest from the east. One of the great tragic ironies of the second world war is that we went into it to defend Poland from a military invader, but at the end Britain and the United States handed Poland back to an even worse dictator than the one who originally invaded on 1 September 1939.

It has not been mentioned today but it must be put on the record again that there are more Polish nationals recorded in the Righteous Among the Nations than those of any other nationality anywhere on Earth. More than 6,000 Polish citizens risked arrest, torture and death for themselves or their families to save Jews from the holocaust. That should also be remembered.

I want to talk about the Silent Unseen, the Polish secret resistance, who have very strong connections with Fife. Many of them lived just across the constituency border at Silverburn House in Leven and in Largo House. General Sikorski was headquartered for part of the war at Tulliallan, in the far west of Fife. I am delighted that thanks to my good friend and constituent Maciej Dokurno, working alongside the Polish consulate, the Polish Embassy and others, the contribution that the Silent Unseen made to the war effort is now—only now—beginning to be recognised.

One of the great heroes or heroines of the Polish resistance was Elżbieta Zawacka—her name is often anglicised as Elizabeth Watson—who was the only female member of the Silent Unseen. She was arrested and imprisoned by the Soviet authorities as a British agent and spent a significant part of her life in prison. After she was released, she continued to work for the liberation of Poland and was an active member of the Solidarity movement. Thanks to her, Poland was eventually liberated, not in 1945 but almost 50 years later, when the people of Poland were finally given the right to choose their own Government and their own future.

That act of handing Poland over to the Soviets at the end of the war is something that we can never allow ourselves to forget. We have heard a lot today about the enormous debt of gratitude that we all owe to Poland for what Poles did for us for during the war, but we

should never forget our debt of remorse for what we did to them and their country afterwards. I believe it was one of the darkest days in the 20th-century history of the United Kingdom.

As I have said, a lot of the history of the Poles during the war was never really given its proper place, sometimes for genuine reasons of national security, and sometimes because the Soviet Union did not want to recognise anything that had happened, and certainly not the massacre at Katyn, for example. The Soviet Union did not want to recognise that those who fought for Poland under the command of British forces were not enemy agents but troops fighting against the Nazis as well.

A lot of people—some of whom are in the Chamber today—are trying to make sure that this story is told and continues to be told, as it deserves to be. When I learned that I was going to speak in this debate, I put a wee post on my Facebook page, saying that if there was anything that people wanted me to raise, they should please let me know. I have had any number of comments on the page and by email giving the names of Polish people who my constituents have lived beside, worked beside, been treated by in hospitals, been served by in shops, and so on. That makes it very clear that the Polish nationals in Fife are welcome, and I hope they will always be made welcome.

I received a message from someone I did not know called Slawek Fejfer. When I saw the Polish spelling, I wondered whether it was a pseudonym, because I thought it was somebody who lived in Fife. He asked me particularly to raise the fact that Polish nationals do not have the right to vote in most UK elections. I was pleased to be able to remind him that EU nationals can vote in elections that are under the control of the Scottish Government, and I sincerely hope that all the elections in the United Kingdom will soon follow suit, because it seems to me that we do not vote for what or where we have been, but for where we want to go together. It is only right that those who have chosen to make their future part of our future should have a full say in that future.

I checked up to find out whether Slawek's was a genuine name. Not only did I find that it is genuine; apparently he lives in a place called Shrewsbury—I have never heard of that place before. I hope his constituency MP, the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), is listening to his concerns and will support his demand that he and his family should have the right to vote—possibly for the sitting MP—next time the opportunity comes along.

To finish, the greatest recognition that we can give to our Polish colleagues and friends now is to allow them to continue to play a full part in the nations that they have chosen to call home. It is almost exactly a year to the day since we had a similar debate here in Westminster Hall. At that time, the denial or the delaying of the granting of the right of Polish nationals to live here permanently took up a great part of that debate. Despite that being one of the top priorities for the Brexit negotiating team, it has still not happened, and I cannot understand why. We have had comforting and reassuring words; we do not yet have a legally binding guarantee. I would like the Minister to tell us today that that legally binding guarantee will come and will be unconditional.

I do not understand why the leader of the United Kingdom Government cannot say today what the leader of the Scottish Government said over a year ago to our

Polish nationals and nationals of other European countries who live here among us. What I want the UK Government to say to them is what the Scottish Government have already said to them: “This is your home. This is where you belong. We want you to stay for as long as you and your family want to stay here with us.”

10.39 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab):

I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing this debate. Before I go any further, I pay my condolences to the parents of Dagmara Przybysz, who was bullied and suffered a racist attack. She is not the only person who has been treated in that way. A significant number of cases of racist treatment of Poles have led to injuries and deaths. I wholly condemn such behaviour and all of us in this place should condemn any form of racist attack against any individual. As I say, I pay my condolences to Dagmara's family and all those who are supporting them.

A lot of Members have mentioned the statistics relating to the Polish community in the UK; let me see whether I can clarify some of the issues. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2015 an estimated 831,000 residents of the UK had been born in Poland. An estimated 916,000 people resident in the UK are of Polish nationality. If we get the figures together, it gives us a framework. A 2013 analysis of the 2011 census conducted by the Office for National Statistics reported that Polish was the second most spoken language in England, after English. It is not just Harry and William. About 546,000 people—1% of the population—describe it as their main language.

As well as the Polish nationals who have come to the UK since Poland joined the EU in 2004, a significant community was already here of Polish people who came to the UK during the second world war. The 1951 UK census showed that the number of Polish-born immigrants quadrupled from before the war to more than 160,000. A lot of Members have talked about the bravery of the Polish pilots who joined the RAF to fight in the battle of Britain. In Birmingham, we have Castle Bromwich, where the Spitfire was manufactured. Many Polish air crew and pilots who were based there worked as mechanics to quickly turn around the Spitfires that had been in action. A lot of the pilots fought bravely and went into action again and again, every time they were required or called upon. I pay tribute to all those people. They played a huge role, and that example reinforces the role of the Polish community in this country. It is why I am utterly appalled by the racist attacks on the Polish community, which I wholly condemn.

An issue was raised about the NATO base and Poland. I have discussed some of those issues with General Ben Hodges, the current NATO commander—the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham talked about Germany and where the second NATO base should be—and he said that in the event of any action, the logistics of getting the mass of equipment and troops to the frontline as quickly as possible would be critical. Establishing a base in Poland would therefore be a positive thing to do and would ensure a strong role for NATO. As part of that, it is crucial, in light of what has happened in Crimea and the need to protect northern Europe, that Poland continues to play an integral role in our NATO defences, and I support that.

[*Mr Khalid Mahmood*]

The hon. Gentleman raised a significant number of issues, one of which was a trade envoy for Poland, which would be a positive thing. Members have talked about how work in their capacity as trade envoys has produced significant support for bilateral relationships. Trade envoys help ensure we get more trade on both sides and create better relationships. Trade is usually one of the better ways to improve relationships, so it is important we do that.

The hon. Gentleman talked about being a Polish Member of Parliament. Probably the first Polish Member of Parliament was Mark Lazarowicz, who represented Edinburgh North and Leith, although he is no longer in the House. I believe he was the first MP of Polish heritage, and he worked hard to represent the community.

Another issue that has been raised is how we get more investments in companies already involved in Poland. It is positive for us to have better trade. Depending on how the current Brexit negotiations go, we could be put in a very different arena. There are significant issues for us to deal with in terms of where Poland stands, what happens with Brexit, how we move forward and what other agreements there may be. Poland's status within the EU means that some of those issues will have to be worked out separately.

In December 2016, the inaugural UK-Poland intergovernmental consultations were held in London. It was the first time that the two Governments held a "structured, comprehensive dialogue at Cabinet level."

They agreed a series of collaborative measures in defence, foreign policy, security, the economy and business, and science and innovation. Those measures included:

"the bilateral deployment of around 150 UK armed service personnel to Poland within enhanced Forward Presence...agreement to sign a defence cooperation treaty...strengthening of UK/Polish industry cooperation...coordinating opportunities to support the growth of UK and Polish small businesses...a showcase of UK-Polish research collaboration and increased academic exchange...ongoing cooperation to tackle global challenges including energy security, counter terrorism and cyber crime".

One issue that needs to be added to the list is the status of those in the Polish community in the UK who are not registered British citizens. What will happen to them? The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union are putting proposals to the EU in relation to that, but I would be interested to hear from the Minister what progress has been made since the inaugural meeting in December 2016. The citizenship and status of those Poles who live here is very important.

Time is limited, so I will come to a conclusion. I thank all Members who have participated in this debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has acted as an assistant. Some great interventions have been made throughout the debate.

10.47 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for initiating this debate. May I say how much we all appreciate his hard work as chair of the very active all-party group on Poland?

The UK-Poland relationship is at its strongest in living memory, and it is a genuinely strategic partnership. That is partly a result of sustained commitment by this Government. Perhaps I can give a flavour of the investment we have made in building the partnership, while addressing as many of the points that Members have raised as possible.

My hon. Friend is unique in this House for his Polish origins, but there are many Polish links across the UK, and I am pleased to have such a strong Polish community in my constituency. In Melton Mowbray, the strong Polish community dates back to the second world war. Most were RAF pilots, but looking at my hon. Friend, I am not sure he would ever have been able to fit into a Spitfire.

As has been mentioned, Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are in Poland today, celebrating our rich shared history. Today they visit Gdańsk's Shakespeare theatre, which was built on the site of a 17th-century theatre that once hosted touring English players performing works of the English renaissance. The visit also looks ahead to the future. Yesterday Their Royal Highnesses visited Warsaw's new centre of digital start-ups, which has very strong links to London. They oversaw the final stages of a competition among Polish start-ups seeking the chance to develop their products in the UK. The successful tech entrepreneurs will join the 30,000 businesses Poles have set up in the UK. I note that my hon. Friend said that there were 87,000 such businesses. Let us agree to split the difference and say that there are lots of Polish businesses in the UK, and we are very pleased with all of them.

My hon. Friend mentioned the problem of EuroEco Fuels. I can confirm that our ambassador in Poland has raised that case with the Polish authorities; the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade are monitoring the case very closely. Also, may I invite hon. Members to the excellent UK-Poland Belvedere Forum that was mentioned? I was delighted to launch the first forum in Warsaw in March; the next forum will be held in London next spring.

The strong contribution of the Polish community to our economy and society is abundantly clear to all of us. It is the driving force behind the deepening relationship between our two countries in business, science and culture, and is behind the growth in trade that reached £15 billion last year. Poland is the UK's leading trade partner in central Europe, accounting for 40% of our exports to the region. We heard mention of a possible trade envoy this morning. I am not aware that we have any trade envoys to countries inside the EU, but of course it is possible that that may change in due course.

Since my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took office a year ago, we have enhanced the bilateral relationship dramatically. We have established new annual dialogues between our Governments and our civil societies to build broader, more vibrant and more diverse collaboration. We already work together on a range of priorities, from tackling modern slavery and serious organised crime to the fight against financial fraud. Above all, our mutual security interests are central to our co-operation.

Within NATO and beyond, we share a steadfast commitment to Europe's security and defence, demonstrated by the deployment in April of 150 British troops now stationed in Orzysz. We look to agree a bilateral defence treaty to build on that partnership further, because it is

not just within our respective borders that our interests align. We are working hand in hand with Poland on defence and security matters across the globe. That was clearly demonstrated in March by the joint visit to Ukraine of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Polish Foreign Minister, Witold Waszczykowski. Further afield, our Governments are committed to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, and to the global coalition to counter Daesh. Poland's election to the UN Security Council will see our co-operation deepen further once it is in place in January.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham raised the question of a permanent NATO base in Poland and whether we can guarantee Poland's sovereignty and independence. I want to be crystal clear that our commitment to NATO's collective defence and Poland's sovereignty is unwavering. Our contribution to NATO's enhanced forward presence is an historic commitment to Poland. I heard the gratitude of the Polish Government for the UK's support directly when I met the deputy Defence Minister in Warsaw in March.

This debate has celebrated our close co-operation and has raised several pertinent questions. Foremost are the rights of EU citizens in the UK. The Government have always been clear about the valuable contribution that they all make to our country. We have always sought to provide as much certainty as possible to the 3 million EU citizens in the UK, and, crucially, the 1 million UK nationals in the EU. That is why we have put EU and UK nationals first in our exit negotiations. We want to reach a reciprocal agreement for EU citizens in Britain and UK nationals in Europe as quickly as possible. Our detailed proposals represent a fair and serious offer to EU citizens. I hope that that will be recognised in the EU and that we can reach the agreement we seek to protect the interests of all.

I want to say very clearly—this is perhaps the most important immediate issue facing us—that I, the Government and all of us utterly condemn any violence against Polish people in the UK. I have addressed Polish audiences on this issue and cannot overstate the point too much. Poles are valued, and we condemn and deplore any violence against them. When it is motivated by racial hatred on the back of some kind of EU argument, it is absolutely disgusting, reprehensible and unacceptable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham mentioned the tragic suicide of a Polish girl, whose inquest has just taken place in Truro. One incidence of hate crime is one too many. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that hate crime of any kind has absolutely no place in British society. I can reassure Members that we have the most robust legal framework in the world for tackling the issue. The Government published a hate crime action plan last year that includes working with schools to equip teachers and parents to challenge and report hatred, as well as new funding for projects to tackle the problem.

The Nord Stream pipeline was mentioned. The issue is that it would go directly from Russia to Germany, bypassing Ukraine, where there are existing pipelines. I reassure hon. Members that the UK remains committed to ensuring a diverse and strong energy market. It is clear to all of us that reliance on any single supplier represents a risk to Europe's energy supply. That is why we are working with our European partners to minimise

that risk, and any new developments must be fully compliant with EU legislation. To that end, we are watching carefully developments in the Senate, which might reinforce sanctions against Russia, which would have implications for the pipeline.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned constitutional reform. I can assure the House that Her Majesty's Government follow developments in Poland closely. The rule of law is a vital part of every democracy. In active democracies, rule of law issues such as these are best dealt with in the countries concerned. As members of the EU they must of course comply with the high standards we expect. At the May General Affairs Council, Poland and the European Commission agreed to resume dialogue on the issue. It is not for me to prejudge the outcome of that dialogue, but Members can rest assured that there is a clear and important focus on the issue that my hon. Friend raised.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) mentioned the consular work in Belfast, which we acknowledge. The Poles are doing that very well. As my intervention implied, I was puzzled by his point about the Border Force entry requirements for a Pole, as an EU citizen travelling between cities in the UK. I urge him to take that up with the Home Secretary. In order to assist that process I will ask my office to forward to the Home Secretary an account of this debate so that they can be alerted to the issue he has raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham also raised the prospect of Poland being threatened with fines or penalties for not complying with the refugee relocation mechanism. The UK continues to support refugees and host communities through significant development aid and by resettling the most vulnerable people from the region. We are also working internationally to tackle the drivers that cause people to leave their homes in the first place. Unmanaged migration to Europe is a shared and complex problem. We are committed to working with all our European partners to tackle the migration crisis.

The UK and Poland have long been close allies and friends. As we prepare to leave the European Union, a strong partnership between our countries is more important now than ever. That is why we have established new dialogues and re-energised relations. The unparalleled contacts between our peoples are at the heart of our partnership, and they represent our greatest opportunity. The children of Poles who have chosen to make their lives in the United Kingdom have made friends in neighbourhoods and classrooms across our country. As they enter the workforce—in business, academia, the sciences, the arts and even politics—they will undoubtedly feel a strong affinity to both Poland and the UK. That provides a catalyst to drive forward a stronger UK-Poland relationship. I am sure I reflect the feelings of hon. Members of all parties when I say I am determined to make the most of that opportunity.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Mr Kawczynski, you have 30 seconds for a final comment.

10.59 am

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, and I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for his

[*Daniel Kawczynski*]

comprehensive response to the points raised. I am pleased that we now have an annual Anglo-Polish—sorry, British-Polish—summit. I look forward to working with the Minister in future on British-Polish relations.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Will Members leaving the Chamber please do so quickly and quietly?

Drones: Risk to Aviation

11 am

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the risk to UK aviation from drones.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. On Sunday 2 July, the runway at Gatwick Airport was closed twice—once for nine minutes and once for five minutes—as a result of the incursion of a drone. Five flights were diverted to other airports and several others were put into holding patterns, at great cost and inconvenience to airlines, the airport and, most importantly, passengers. In 2014, Airprox Board investigations into aircraft near misses with drones found that there were three, of which one was of the most serious category A. In 2015, the figure had risen to 27, with 13 category A incidents. In 2016, it had risen to 71, with 26 category A incidents—a huge increase in the most serious type of incidents. I secured this debate to find out from the Government what action they are taking and considering to counter that increasing threat to the lives of aircraft crew, passengers and those living under flight paths.

I am not anti-drone, and nor is the British Airline Pilots Association. I thank BALPA, along with the Civil Aviation Authority, Heathrow Airport, National Air Traffic Services and the House Library, for providing information on this subject. When properly and safely controlled, drones are of great value in, for example, precision agriculture, inspection of power cables, aerial photography, mapping and police work. Just this morning, I spoke with a constituent who runs Cloudbase Images Ltd. He was recently asked to carry out some work in the proximity of an airport. He contacted air traffic control there and they discussed a safe way of carrying out that work, which meant modifying the client's requests. That is an example of how drones should and can be operated safely and professionally.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue to Westminster Hall for consideration. He mentioned the British Airline Pilots Association, which has warned that the use of drones could cause what it refers to as a catastrophic crash. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is the time to step in and, perhaps, draw up the protocols used by the firm that he referred to and make them part of aviation law? There is not much sense in closing the door after the horse has bolted. Now is the time to get the protocols in order.

Jeremy Lefroy: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and I will come on to it. He is absolutely right. One of the reasons for having this debate is to find out what the Government are doing and urge them to take action quickly where it is necessary.

My constituent was concerned because the airport said that very few people contacted them, even though it is adjacent to a big city where a lot of professional drone work is carried out. He was worried that others were not taking steps to contact air traffic control or to make the appropriate safety arrangements.

There has been enormous growth in the ownership of drones. Some 530,000 were bought in 2014 alone. Of course, the vast majority are for leisure use. When used responsibly, they are a great asset. They encourage

interest in aviation and aerodynamics and lead to innovation. But there is also irresponsible or downright dangerous use, which poses a risk to aircraft and passengers. The key is regulation and enforcement that protects aviation without seriously damaging what is becoming an important sector of the economy.

Drones are currently subject to the Civil Aviation Act 1982 and the Air Navigation Order 2016, which stipulate—for all drones—that they must not “endanger persons or property” and that whoever is controlling the drone

“must maintain direct, unaided visual contact”

at all times. Drones weighing more than 7 kg must not be flown at a height of more than 400 feet, or 500 metres horizontally, nor in

“Class A, C, D or E airspace”

or

“within an aerodrome traffic zone during the notified hours of watch of the air traffic control unit”.

To operate a drone outside those limits, or to carry out aerial work—even non-commercial work—requires an operating permit from the Civil Aviation Authority. That permission is given on a case-by-case basis by the CAA. By September 2016, 2,500 permits had been issued, which strikes me as a small number compared with the number of people who I believe are carrying out work with drones at the moment, whether commercial or non-commercial. There are further requirements for someone who wishes to operate regular flights with a drone. The CAA will also wish to be assured of the competence of the person piloting the drone.

I wonder how many people who purchase drones for recreational or commercial use are fully aware of the requirements. I spoke with someone recently—someone who I and presumably they themselves would regard as responsible—who had lost control of a drone. It had flown more than 10 miles at a height of 100 metres before running out of power.

So my first question to the Minister is what work is being done to ensure that all purchasers of drones, whether for leisure or commercial use, are aware of existing regulations. Although I believe that further, tighter regulation is essential—I will come on to that—the Department and CAA can do much right now.

Looking ahead to what needs to be done, the first task is to establish how much damage the collision of a drone with an aircraft would cause. The Government, together with the CAA, BALPA and the Military Aviation Authority, have carried out research on that and the report is complete; I understand that it will be published soon. When will that be and what action does the Minister intend to take on publication?

From speaking to those involved in this area, I understand that the risks arising from a drone impact are likely to be serious, even with very small drones, and that there is a particular risk to helicopters, military or civilian, such as those used by the police, search and rescue or air ambulance services. The possibility of a drone strike is now listed by the Joint Helicopter Command of our armed forces as one of the five greatest risks to life in its sphere of operations.

BALPA believes that a drone of only a few tens of grams could cause serious damage in a collision at speed. The most popular drone weighs 1.5 kg—

1,500 grams. We will need careful and comprehensive regulation covering all but the smallest and least powerful of drones.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a telling speech about the need for action. Is it not time for some Government action? They consulted on possible regulations some time ago now; the consultation finished months ago. They were then waiting for a framework of regulation from the European Aviation Safety Agency. That was published in May. It is not too much to expect Ministers to come forward with a proper action plan for the appropriate regulation of drones, which could promote safety and at the same time safeguard the innovation that the responsible use and production of drones can provide.

Jeremy Lefroy: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I know that the Minister takes the matter extremely seriously and that the Government are looking at it. It is important that it is taken up quickly, because technology moves on. People are buying drones in the thousands every week and they need to know what the situation is. Airprox incidents are occurring at more than one a week at the moment, and some of them are extremely serious. That is not just in the UK but across the world. The UK could be a world leader in ensuring safety in this area.

I believe that we will need careful and comprehensive regulation covering all but the very smallest and least powerful of drones. In other words, it is likely that almost all drones sold will need to be covered by specific regulations, not just those over 7 kg, which are currently subject to the stricter rules. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said—he speaks from great experience, having looked at these matters for the Opposition—the Government published a consultation in December 2016 with a final date of March 2017. He also rightly referred to the European publication from May this year. It is time that we had a response. One of the major reasons for my calling this debate is to give the Government the opportunity to set out the timetable for their response.

It has become clear to me as I have looked at this problem that there is no one solution. More regulation needs to be introduced urgently, and I am grateful to BALPA for sharing with me the work that it has done on this issue.

First, we need compulsory regulation for all drones. Perhaps there could be a de minimis exemption for the very smallest and least powerful, but, as I said, BALPA reckons that even a drone of a few tens of grams can cause serious damage, so it would have to be de minimis in the strict meaning of that phrase. It is essential that any drone capable of causing damage to aircraft and on the ground is registered to a named individual on purchase, and the registration should be transferred if the drone is sold on. All drones should be sold with a copy of the drone code, and the registration process should include a statement that the owner has read and understood it, and agrees to abide by it, so that it is taken seriously by purchasers of all drones.

Secondly, if somebody wishes to operate drones above a certain size and capability—again, I suggest it should be a fairly small size, given the potential damage of a

[Jeremy Lefroy]

small drone on impact—they should be required to acquire a licence that shows their competence to do so. Thirdly, there should be mandatory geo-fencing around airports and other sensitive areas, such as prisons, so that drones are prevented from flying in places that would create significant safety risks.

Fourthly—I believe this needs to be looked at carefully—third-party liability insurance should be considered for all registered drones. It is clear that even relatively small drones are capable of causing serious damage or injury. Accidents do happen, and people should know that they are protected from potential bankruptcy when they are buying something that does not cost them very much in the first place. In addition, if people have to take out insurance, they think about what they are doing much more carefully than they would if they think there are no risks involved. Buying insurance shows that a person knows there are serious risks. Finally, investment in technology is required to allow air traffic controllers to see drones when a conflict with manned aircraft is possible.

As always, there is a balance to be struck when introducing tighter regulation. However, consider how safe aviation is now, compared with 50 years ago. That was brought about by sensible and effective regulation, both in the manufacture of aircraft and engines and in the control of airspace. The same must apply to drones.

11.13 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):

It is a pleasure to respond to this brief debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for bringing these matters to the House's attention. He is right that they are salient. His concernment about drones is a result not of any amaritude, but of a fear of risk and an understanding that drones may not only pose problems but may have beneficial uses. I shall speak about both those things in a moment.

Before I start to do so, I want to deal with the intervention of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden). He is right that it is time that we did more. We looked at these matters closely and consulted—I shall speak about that in more detail in a moment. The Opposition have publicly made it clear a couple of times recently that they are happy to work with us in looking at what more can be done. I have spoken to them privately—I am happy to make that known—and I can confirm that that is very much our spirit too. As a Parliament, we want to act properly and reasonably swiftly to take action before any of the fears that I ascribed to my hon. Friend become realities. There is a seriousness about this and an intent to act. That is what I want to make clear to the Chamber, and the intervention of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield gives me the opportunity to do so.

Let me deal rather more widely with the issue of drones. Of course, we are aware of the risks to safety, security and privacy. A misuse of this technology is wholly unacceptable, as my hon. Friend said. However, it is important to recognise that this is an emerging technology with potential benefits. There is a growing market as the technology offers the UK opportunities, and not just economic ones. The positive use of drones

was well illustrated when, as many here know, the firefighters at Grenfell Tower used them after the incident to inspect the top floors, which had been deemed too unsafe to be inspected by any other means. The west midlands fire service has been using drones since 2007 for assessing sites and for wide-area searches. Drones can be used beneficially and safely, and they can increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Some airlines are using drones to conduct safety inspections of their planes in much less time, making the operations more efficient and leading to fewer delays on the tarmac for customers. Using pioneering technology that improves services and delivers economic benefits is a key element of the Government's industrial strategy. Drones have the potential in many ways to transform the way in which businesses operate and interact with their consumers. They have a range of applications. We are working with industry to explore those uses, but my hon. Friend is right to say that that has to be done within a framework that guarantees safety and security.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and I referred to the British Airline Pilots Association, which has asked for a protocol to be put in place. Has the Minister had the opportunity to speak to it and hear its ideas about how a protocol would work?

Mr Hayes: I hope to deal with that later, but if I do not, I am more than happy to get back to the hon. Gentleman. As this is a short debate, we will not necessarily have time to explore all aspects of the subject, and there some important matters I want to make absolutely clear.

The misuse of drones poses a significant challenge. We already have regulations that prohibit some of those misuses. Alongside those offences, we can prosecute operators for the negligent or malicious use of drones. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford will be aware that it is an offence under the Air Navigation Order 2016 to endanger an aircraft. Those convicted can face a prison sentence of up to five years. The order applies to all aircraft, including drones, and stipulates that “a person must not recklessly or negligently cause or permit an aircraft to endanger any person or property”.

Under article 94 of the order, the person in charge of a drone weighing under 20 kg must maintain direct, unaided visual contact with the aircraft to avoid collisions, and small drones should not be flown above 400 feet.

My hon. Friend asked whether we can do more. It is important to broadcast those measures as widely as possible. We have worked with the CAA to do that—I shall speak about that—but I accept that there is always more to do. I will look again at whether we need to go still further with those discussions and with the work that results from them and this debate. As you know, Sir Roger, I take the view that Westminster Hall debates must have a purpose beyond the Minister simply repeating what he has said already or affirming Government policy; they must help us move that policy on. I will happily look again at whether we can do still more.

In addition, the Secretary of State is able to make restriction-of-flying regulations as necessary. Flying restrictions already prohibit drones from being flown over high-risk areas, which are sensitive sites such as airports and so on. When incidents occur, drone users are for the most part clearly unaware of the rules, or

recklessly breaking them. The point about awareness was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford. We need to make people absolutely aware that if they behave in a way that is prohibited, they will be pursued, and that if they act recklessly, action must be taken. It is as simple as that.

We have taken action. We worked with the Civil Aviation Authority and the industry to launch safety advice via a new drone code and a consumer drone website. A Drone Assist app has also been created by NATS to educate users about local flying restrictions. However, as I have said, one can always do more, so I will take a look at that.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does the Minister agree that knowing who the person is who is responsible for a drone is vital? That is the point I made about compulsory registration. There is a story—perhaps apocryphal, but perhaps not—that quite recently a drone was flown into the Shard, in London. People only found out who owned the drone when the owner went to retrieve it and asked for it back—which strikes me as quite an example of chutzpah. Does the Minister agree that registration and individual responsibility for drones is critical?

Mr Hayes: I have heard the point my hon. Friend makes very clearly, and if we are to consider further action, that will be one of the areas to look at closely and, as I said, urgently. The argument in favour of registration is advanced frequently, but it is none the worse for that. Certainly, I have heard what he said and we will take it into account.

The CAA launched a campaign to get large retailers such as Maplin and John Lewis to have drone code leaflets alongside drones sales. CAA research demonstrates how those efforts have been successful: awareness of the drone code has risen by 50% in the six months from August 2016 to February 2017.

The Government have also been working with drone manufacturers to ensure that airspace restrictions are adhered to. The software that implements such a restriction is known as geo-fencing, to which my hon. Friend made reference. Many of the leading drone manufacturers already include forms of geo-fencing capability in their drones. For example, DJI, the world's leading drone manufacturer, builds geo-fencing into all of its drones. As a result, when someone tries to fly a DJI drone in a geo-fenced area, the drone either refuses to take off or, if already flying, refuses to enter a geo-fenced area and instead hovers in place.

My hon. Friend and I have had a private conversation on the subject—it is only fair to let the Chamber know that—which made clear to me that we both understand the significance and value of geo-fencing. It is a good example of the industry pioneering new technology safely. The Government are working with the industry to improve how geo-fencing can be made more secure and effective in future. Other wider security measures need to be considered, and we will discuss those with industry as well.

There is also a cross-Government counter-drones group, which has been undertaking a programme of work to improve our defences against drones with a focus on sensitive and important locations. Many trials and demonstrations have taken place to examine the applicability of various technological options to detect

and counter the misuse of drones. Work is also being done by the Department for Transport in conjunction with UK airports and the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure on implementing operational mitigations against drones being launched near an airport. Furthermore, for those users who still seek to break the rules, we have acted to improve enforcement. We have delivered a memorandum of understanding agreed between the DFT, the CAA, the Home Office and the police with regards to the policing and monitoring of drones.

We heard earlier about the consultation, which took place up to March this year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield mentioned. The consultation looked at three key areas: stimulating drone innovation and enterprise; ensuring safety and operation within the law; and laying the foundations for a developed drone market. It set out our firm intention to keep rules and regulations at pace with this emerging market and to ensure that actions to tackle misuse can be taken.

To be clear, the Government intend to introduce further measures once we have fully analysed the evidence presented in our consultation process. My hon. Friend asked, not unreasonably, when that would be. I have assured him previously, and do so now again publicly, that it will be very soon indeed. I have also committed to the Opposition that I will keep them fully informed of that. The approach they have taken on this is a good illustration of how Government and Opposition can work together. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield has been pressing properly, as Oppositions should, for the Government to take action, and we will do so in the spirit that has been engendered by the conversations we have already enjoyed. Let us move together as a Parliament on this matter, which stretches beyond any party political divide.

It goes without saying that this is a matter of public safety, but it is also a matter of not inhibiting the beneficial use of drones. It is easy to say, “If we didn't have any drones, everything would be fine,” but as I have already mentioned in the illustrations I have given and the examples I have offered, drones can be used productively, helpfully and safely. Nevertheless, the framework for the technology has to be in place. As with all technological change and innovation, it is a challenge for legal frameworks to keep pace with such highly dynamic circumstances.

Richard Burden: During discussions on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill in the last Parliament, the Minister said that he hoped to respond to the consultation and produce draft regulations in the summer. Are we still looking at that kind of timeframe?

Mr Hayes: For me, summer is an endless affair—my life is a constant summer, with a touch of spring and the warm glowing fires of winter—but frankly we need to act early this year, and given where we are, that means summer. The hon. Gentleman asks the question, perfectly reasonably, and I am happy to answer that I hope to be able to do something in the summer—if it can be done. I want to get it right, as I do not want to proceed on the basis of hastily doing something that we then regret, because this is a challenging and complex area for the very reasons of technological change that I mentioned, although they are not a reason to do nothing.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will the Minister, who is indeed a summery person, undertake to publish the report on the impact of drones on aircraft during the extended summer to which he referred?

Mr Hayes: I have talked about the critical role of the CAA and about the existing restrictions around airports, so there are two points there: first, to ensure that the law is in the right place; and, secondly, to ensure that enforcement is adequate. As it is about both those things, airports in particular, but also other critical national infrastructure, will of course need to be taken into account in our consultation response and any further measures that we might consider.

Shakespeare said in “Henry V”:

“All things are ready if our minds be so”,

and our mind is ready to take further action. Tennyson, the great Lincolnshire poet, said:

“dream not that the hours will last”,

by which he meant that there is a time when we should act, and that we should not dream that it will go on forever. Notwithstanding my sunny disposition, my eternal summer, it is important that we act swiftly, proportionately and carefully, but without delay. That is the message that I take from this short debate.

In the near future, we will publish the consultation response—as I said, in the summer. I hope that will address some of the concerns expressed, but we will also consider further steps as necessary.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Taxi Trade

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the future of the taxi trade.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. The black hackney carriage is one of the great icons of our capital city, the knowledge of London produces the most qualified taxi drivers in the world and the licensed taxi trade is a mainstay of public transport systems in towns and cities across the UK, but unless action is taken, London’s famous black taxi risks being driven off the road altogether.

The taxi and private hire industry is, in many respects, at the cutting edge of an industrial revolution that is sweeping the world at unprecedented scale and pace. Breakthroughs in technology offer unlimited potential to improve our quality of life and revolutionise the way we travel, but we have seen on the streets of London and other major cities around the world how technological advances can be exploited by multinational companies that seek to drive competitors off the road with a business model based on poor pay and conditions for drivers, exploitation of regulatory loopholes and predatory pricing that is made possible by huge venture capital and aggressive tax avoidance.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend knows that black cabs are actually manufactured in Coventry and on its outskirts. A lot of investment—Chinese investment, actually—has gone into black cabs over the past few years. The developments that he describes may have a consequence for the production of black cabs, meaning that a lot of jobs could be at stake. I studied the Taylor report, and I noticed that it is actually very weak in dealing with that situation. A lot of people—not least taxi drivers themselves—are quite concerned about the consequences.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. My hon. Friend can be proud of the role that Coventry’s manufacturing plays in the licensed taxi industry. My argument is that there are two possible futures, both for the manufacturing of vehicles and manufacturing jobs, and for other areas of the taxi and private hire industry: a bright future or an existential crisis. The Government have a clear role in ensuring that we head towards a bright future rather than a bleak future.

The all-party parliamentary group on taxis, which I am proud to chair, was founded with that in mind, to ensure that the trade has a strong voice in Parliament. For the past six months we have conducted a wide-ranging inquiry on the future of the trade, which led to the publication of our report, “Lessons from London: The future of the UK taxi trade”. I will focus on that report and its recommendations.

I am glad to see the Minister here. I know that he takes an interest in the future of the trade and in these issues, and I look forward to working with him. He will be pleased to know that, during our inquiry, we engaged with a wide range of stakeholders in and around the industry to look at issues such as passenger and public safety, the effectiveness of regulation, and the future of the taxi trade. I was delighted that an APPG inquiry, as

opposed to a Select Committee inquiry, generated such interest. We received 115 pieces of written evidence and heard from a wide range of witnesses at three oral evidence sessions.

I want to place on the record my thanks to that wide range of stakeholders, which included the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association; United Private Hire Drivers; Transport for London; the GMB and Unite trade unions; Addison Lee; Gett; mytaxi; the London Taxi Company; Guide Dogs UK; and the Chair of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I also want to say a particular thank you to my constituents. It would take some time to name all the constituents I have had conversations with about this issue—as many people know, Ilford North still has a reputation for being “green badge valley”—but I particularly thank Danny Fresco, Jim Ludlow, Steve Kenton and Sean Harris for the time they have taken to engage with me throughout my time as their Member of Parliament. It is a source of regret that, although Uber was invited to give evidence, it chose not to, because it has a direct role and responsibility in many of these issues. I hope that its level of engagement will change.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work with the all-party group, particularly in producing such an excellent report. Does he agree that a lot of the report’s recommendations are applicable not just in London but across the whole of the UK? He will be aware that taxi drivers from my constituency in Cardiff, and many others, made submissions to the inquiry. The group’s findings apply to many of the issues that the trade faces across the UK.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I really welcome his engagement with the inquiry as a Cardiff Member. In many respects, London bears the brunt of these issues, but many other towns and cities across the country are equally—if differently—affected. Our intention when producing the report was to ensure that we learned lessons from London but also addressed issues that apply across the UK.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I am sure my hon. Friend realises that the regulations were actually eased some years ago, under the coalition Government. That makes local authorities powerless to do anything about these issues—Coventry, for example, has the same problem with Uber. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I have consulted trade unions and taxi drivers themselves, and they are very concerned.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend leads me neatly into the inquiry’s first theme: the effectiveness of regulation. Some taxi and private hire vehicle legislation is more than 100 years old. It includes the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 and, in London, the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869 and the London Cab Order 1934. I should probably declare that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and an elected member of the London Borough of Redbridge. I strongly agree with the Local Government Association and the Law Commission that we need a taxi and private hire vehicle licensing reform Bill. There have been sweeping changes

across the taxi and private hire industry, and legislation and regulation have not effectively caught up. That is causing a wide range of issues.

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wes Streeting: I certainly will. I welcome the hon. Lady to her place.

Julia Dockerill: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He mentions looking again at taxi legislation. Does he agree that pedicabs, which are something of a problem in central London—they have created a lot of concern about passenger safety and congestion, particularly in the west end—should come within that legislation?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. Rickshaws are not just a nuisance on the streets of central London that add to congestion, but given some of the exorbitant prices that their riders propose to charge, they increasingly also rip off tourists. I saw a rickshaw outside Parliament the other day whose rider was proposing to charge £10 for a cycle up the road from Parliament Square to Trafalgar Square. That is terrible value for money and reflects badly on our city. If tourists want an expert guide to take them around London, they should hail a black taxi.

Turning to the need for effective regulation, there has been an explosion in the number of private hire vehicles on the streets of London, and new entrants to the taxi and private hire market have emerged. I am in no way opposed to competition, and I strongly encourage innovation, but the Minister and licensing authorities need to address the issue of fair competition. There have been calls for improvement. The APPG took evidence about the impact of the considerable growth in private hire on congestion on the streets of London. Similarly, many passenger groups and drivers complain about the erratic driving of people who are not properly qualified to drive cabs. I commend to the Minister the recommendation in our report that licensing regulations for private hire vehicles should be updated to include mandatory enhanced topographical tests for PHV drivers, so that they have some awareness of the local community in which they operate.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend and the all-party group for the report, and I apologise for the fact that I cannot stay for the whole debate.

This is also an issue in my constituency and in the borough of Trafford. Does he agree that, although it is obviously an issue of safety, it is also an issue of customer confidence and trust? When unregulated or poorly regulated drivers, or drivers who are subject to poorly enforced regulation, come into an area that they do not know, and where they do not know the customer needs, that has an impact on the reputation of the whole of the legitimate industry.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. In fact, many passengers have experienced the frustration of being in a car where the driver has their nose in the sat-nav, rather than concentrating on the road in the way they ought to. Often drivers choose to take routes that the passenger, who lives in the area, knows full well will be heavily congested, but because the driver lacks basic

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awareness of the roads around them they end up taking routes that are inefficient and add to congestion, which delays passengers. That is why we recommend in our report that the licensing authorities should produce a code of conduct for the use of apps by taxi and private hire vehicle drivers, and that the Government should consider introducing a national code of conduct with basic minimum standards for drivers in all parts of the country to adhere to.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, which is long overdue. We really need an in-depth debate on taxi licensing, and he is making the argument for why. I congratulate him on his review.

My local licensing officer makes a point relevant to the one that my hon. Friend is making, talking about the problem of:

“Cross-border hiring and control of taxis coming into our area. We cannot set the standards for these vehicles and we have no authority to enforce...them. We are concerned about the impact that this could have on public safety.”

One of my local councils, Rossendale Borough Council, was licensing taxis the length and breadth of the United Kingdom not so long ago, which affected other authorities. That cannot be right.

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who leads me neatly on to cross-border hiring, but I want to address plying for hire first.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I have read the report, which is very good. As a former taxi driver, I know how taxi drivers operate and the issues that they face along with passengers. Cross-border hiring is a massive issue. The report says that there has been a 30% reduction of income for drivers in London, but in other areas it is even bigger. A lot of drivers are leaving the trade because other drivers are coming in from other authority areas where following regulations and getting licenses is easy. There should be a cap not only on private hire vehicles—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman to keep his intervention short and to ask a question, not make a speech.

Mohammad Yasin: I am going to do so. I have another meeting to go to, so I have to make the point now. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be a cap not only on vehicles but on private hire drivers' licences?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, and I welcome him to his place in the House. He brings with him considerable expertise on this topic and others, and he will be a great representative for the people of Bedford. He anticipates what I am going to say about cross-border hiring and the cap on private hire numbers. However, before I do that, I want briefly to pick up one issue that has been floating around for some time but has yet to be addressed properly.

The Government recognised that the pace of change in the taxi and private hire industry necessitated some change to legislation and regulations, so they asked the Law Commission to do some work on that. In 2014, the

Law Commission produced a report, including a draft Bill, in which it identified plying for hire as one of the grey areas in need of clarification by legislation.

Many hon. Members will know that under existing regulations licensed taxi drivers in London have to undergo about 8,000 hours of training to pass the knowledge, and only licensed taxi drivers are allowed to ply for hire by picking up from a rank or in response to someone hailing a cab. With the introduction of new technology, there are people effectively hailing private hire vehicles all the time through the click of a button, and that is causing real anger and anxiety on the part of licensed taxi drivers. It is not simply that people feel that the existing law is being flouted. There is a lack of clarity about how we move forward when things have changed, with new technology platforms.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point. My local taxi drivers have shown me where they can locate 15 or 16 Uber cabs sitting around St Albans in car parks. Because they are hailed from the station, that does not count as plying for hire, but it is—it is touting for business but being on another street. Surely that cannot be allowed.

Wes Streeting: I agree. Actually, in some cases, Uber cars use taxi ranks constantly on the streets of central London. There are real issues about how the existing law is enforced and there is a need to clarify it. In our report, we strongly supported those who made representations, particularly the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and other trade unions, including Unite, for which Mike Hedges gave evidence to our panel. We need Ministers to clarify their position on the two-tier system by issuing a formal response to the Law Commission's 2014 report and by introducing a legally enforceable statutory definition of plying for hire.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a case for the updating and modernisation of the regulation and law applying to private hire and hackney carriages. He referred to the Law Commission report, which recommends a national system, and we have had reports from competition authorities that refer to deregulation. Does he agree that the licensing of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles should remain a local authority affair and that, when we look at the facts, deregulation nearly always leads to a worse service?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who leads me directly on to cross-border hiring. He is correct that, although the Government have not formally responded to the Law Commission report and have not introduced as anticipated a new licensing reform Bill for taxi and private hire vehicles, the Deregulation Act 2015 meant that private hire vehicle drivers operating in one area could be licensed in a different area: an issue known as cross-border hiring. In practice, that means that where local authorities have rightly and appropriately determined specific licensing conditions suitable for their local community and population, drivers can abuse the patchwork quilt of licensing regulations across the country to flout rules.

Most alarmingly, we saw evidence of that happening in Rotherham. Right hon. and hon. Members will be acutely aware that in response to the terrible child

sexual exploitation scandal, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council rightly introduced one of the toughest licensing regimes in the country, including the requirement for drivers to have a recording device—either a camera or audio equipment—in operation at all times when someone under the age of, I think, 16 was travelling in the vehicle. However, the council found that private hire drivers could flout those conditions by licensing their vehicle in another part of the country. They could then operate on the streets of Rotherham quite legally and the council could do nothing about it. We heard compelling evidence from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) about the risks presented to the people of Rotherham because those robust standards are being undermined.

Rotherham is the most serious example, but it is not the only example. Reading Council decided not to grant Uber a licence, yet drivers from Uber license themselves in London and drive around the streets of Reading. I was struck by the evidence provided to my office by the Mayor of London about the number of TfL licences granted and where the drivers live. For example, 747 people have TfL-issued licences but live in Birmingham, 260 people live in Manchester and yet have licences granted in London, and 378 people live in Bristol but have licences granted by TfL in London. That is clearly flagrant abuse of the system.

We set out a common-sense approach to dealing with this problem: to create a statutory definition of cross-border hiring under which a journey must begin or end in the licensing authority where the licence was issued. That would be simple and easy to enforce and would solve the problem instantly.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a strong point, and I completely agree with him. Is he aware that this problem is replicated in other parts of the country? In Cardiff we see people with licences granted in Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly, Newport and other locations coming in and working almost entirely in Cardiff, which has different standards. There may also be a specific issue on insurance. People are often insured in other authority areas and may be underinsured for where they operate the majority of their work, or indeed for where they leave their car on the street.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend again makes a powerful point, which was very much reinforced by the evidence we received during our inquiry. I really hope that the Department for Transport acts on cross-border hiring; I think measures on that will be welcomed by local authorities across the country. I am conscious of time and the fact that several hon. Members wish to speak, so I will canter through some of the report's other recommendations, but I will indulge my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) before I do.

Mohammad Yasin: I have to go to another meeting, so I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. One main issue that is very important but is not mentioned in the report is the safety of drivers. Drivers are very vulnerable, especially at night time, and if they have four or five passengers in their car they can get a lot of abuse. There is no mention of driver safety in the report, and I would like something to be added. Does he agree that driver safety is a serious issue that we need to be concerned about?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point, and I will pick it up when I talk about passenger safety. He is quite right that driver safety is something we should take seriously.

We heard compelling calls from a range of stakeholders, particularly people from London, about the need for local licensing authorities to have the power, to be exercised when they need it, to cap the number of private hire vehicles on the streets of a particular town or city. In London, we have seen an explosion in the number of private hire licences to around 120,000—up from 60,000 in, I think, 2010, which is a huge increase. Those private hire vehicles contribute to the congestion on the streets of London, which is filling our air with toxic emissions that result in the preventable deaths of more than 9,000 Londoners each year.

A report by the London Assembly, “London Stalling”, found that the number of private hire vehicles entering the congestion zone had increased by 54% since 2013, and that private hire vehicles are a cause of rising congestion. Those are not necessarily the most polluting vehicles on the streets of London, but the congestion to which they contribute means that more toxic fumes are being pumped into the air. There are two aspects to that. One is that Transport for London and the Mayor of London have been clear that they would like to cap the number of private hire vehicles on the streets of London to tackle the problem, but that they do not have the power to do so. The Government should be permissive in this area, trust local authorities to make appropriate decisions and give them the power to cap the number of private hire vehicles where appropriate. Of course, such a cap would only work if the Department for Transport also tackled cross-border hiring. I hope we will see effective action in both of those areas.

On passenger safety, I have already talked about cross-border hiring and the flouting of local licensing rules, but there is also the issue of insurance, which has already been referred to. All taxis and private hire vehicles are required to hold hire and reward insurance whenever they are carrying a passenger. However, we found during our inquiry that licensing authorities had no way of confirming whether a private hire vehicle had a hire and reward policy in place after its initial licensing, and that police and enforcement officers were only able to tell whether a vehicle was insured or not, rather than what type of insurance the driver held. We recommend that the Government legislate to require all private hire vehicles to have full hire and reward insurance for the duration of a licence, and explore the potential for private hire vehicle operators to have their own hire and reward fleet insurance, to cover all their registered drivers and vehicles.

We also heard powerful evidence on accessibility. I am proud that black hackney carriages are accessible and are a key part of the disability transport network of this city and many others across the country. However, there is still further to go on this. Some 42% of assistance dog owners were refused by a taxi or private hire driver in a one-year period, so although I strongly welcome the action that the Government have already taken in this area—introducing a £1,000 fine for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers who refuse to transport wheelchair users—there is a lot further to go.

First, we need to make sure that all drivers can communicate with passengers and understand their disability access requirements. That is why I strongly

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support the measures that the Mayor of London is trying to introduce on English language testing for drivers before they are able to take a licence. Secondly, the Government and the licensing authorities should require all private hire and taxi drivers who are given a licence to undertake mandatory disability equality training and take an associated test to make sure that they can properly support disabled passengers.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Wes Streeting: I will have to make progress, otherwise I will encroach on the time for other Members to speak. I have talked about the need for taxi and private hire drivers to undergo topographical training, so that they are better drivers and have better skills.

However, my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford—he is no longer in his place; he has another commitment—made a powerful contribution on driver safety, and we really need to look at that, particularly since card payment machines have been put in the back of black taxis. Drivers in my constituency feel more vulnerable than ever if something goes wrong with that machine, because they have to get out of the vehicle to deal with an issue in the back. I have heard stories of drivers being abused or people not paying their fare. Drivers put themselves at risk, and we might want to look at increasing the penalties and sentences for people who abuse taxi drivers in the way we are considering for other public sector workers.

On the future of the taxi trade, it is often said that taxi drivers are not interested in modernisation and are stuck in the past, but I have not found that to be the case. Drivers are keen to drive the new zero emission capable taxis and are excited about the opportunity to reduce polluting emissions from their vehicles. To ensure that they are able to drive them, we hope that the Government will put in place an adequate rapid charging infrastructure to support their use. We also need to make sure that those cabs are affordable. I know that the Government are already looking at grants, as is the Mayor of London, but we also need to look at exemptions from vehicle excise duty. I know that we will have to make that case to the Chancellor and the Treasury, but exemptions would make a real difference to drivers' ability to take up that challenge.

We also need to have a serious discussion on the fares regime, particularly in London, and the extent to which taxi drivers are heavily disadvantaged by fares, which are often set without adequate consultation with the trade. We also need a discussion about the extent to which competitors—particularly Uber—are able to offer artificially low prices and flood the market with drivers in order to drive their competitors off the road. That affects not just licensed taxi drivers but private hire drivers, including Uber drivers, who have seen their incomes fall in recent years because it is in Uber's interest to flood London with as many drivers as possible to maximise its revenues, even if that is at the expense of fast journeys and decent pay and conditions for both taxi drivers and private hire drivers. We need to approach this from the point of view of fair competition, rather than the elimination of competition.

Action by Ministers is long overdue. The debate about the future of the taxi trade has often been unfairly characterised as a debate between those who support

competition and innovation and those who want to cling to the past. That is a lazy analysis. As I have demonstrated this afternoon, the taxi drivers I represent are not afraid of innovation or competition; increasing numbers of drivers are embracing new platforms such as Gett and mytaxi. Many cab drivers also accepted card payments long before it was mandatory, and a great many more are keen to get behind the wheel of the new generation of carbon neutral, electric-capable taxis to play their part in improving air quality and protecting our environment.

However, the consistent theme I found as a constituency MP during our inquiry was that taxi drivers find it increasingly difficult to compete with both hands tied behind their backs in a changing marketplace. Our challenge now is to make sure that the trade enjoys a bright future as well as a proud history. I strongly believe that, with smart and effective regulation and new national standards, the taxi and private hire industries can succeed. I say to the Minister, who is a good man, that many small businessmen and businesswomen and their families are counting on Ministers to act.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): I do not intend to put a time limit on speeches at the moment. I think we will fit everybody in, so long as everybody bears in mind that other hon. Members want to speak. I want to bring in the Front-Bench spokespeople at about 3.30 pm.

2.59 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on securing this debate and on an excellent report. As a vice-chair of the all-party group on taxis, I would love to take lots of credit for the report, but he has worked really hard on it, and we need to take on board many of the things in it.

In Sutton, as in many London constituencies, there is a range of black cab drivers, Uber drivers and other private hire drivers, and some have approached me over the last couple of years to speak about the trade. Black cabs are having an incredibly difficult time, and especially yellow badge drivers, who are restricted to ply for trade in outer London, not least because there are few pick-up points. Business is really drying up for them, and they are finding it very difficult. We need to find ways, as the hon. Gentleman outlined, of modernising the trade, while giving the premium product that a black cab is and allowing them to survive and thrive in and around London.

I know that, until recently, Heathrow was a significant issue for cab drivers because a lot of Uber drivers were taking up parking spaces around the airport. That added to the congestion around Heathrow, which as we all know is pretty horrendous at the best of times.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that people want to become environmentally friendly with their vehicles, but there is a huge onus and cost on black cab drivers when they have to renew their cars. The boundaries are always being pushed, environmentally. To invest maybe £35,000 or £50,000 in a new vehicle is really hard for black cab drivers when they are seeing their trade reduced at the same time. That is partly because of the environmental issues, and it is partly because over the years there have been too few suppliers—only

two or three—of black cabs. That has helped to push the price up, to the cost of the drivers.

We have talked about the modernisation of the trade. It is good to see the change in drivers' attitudes; they are keen to look at card payments and to have greater access for wheelchair users. I remember, probably about 15 years ago, joining my best friend in trying to get a cab. At the time, black cab drivers had to pay about £1,500 to get ramps to make the cabs accessible. The driver stopped, took one look at us and said, "I don't want to get my hands dirty," and got back in his car and drove off. That was ridiculous, so I complained to Transport for London, and the driver rightly got hauled over the coals. I know that all the cab drivers I see would be rightly horrified by that. They stick together and keep together as a trade really well, so any stain on the trade from one rogue driver does them all no good whatsoever. It is great that they stick together and stick up for black cabs.

Black cabs are a premium product, so they will always cost more than, for example, Uber cars. A few people want to drive Uber off the ground, but the majority of the black cab trade take the view outlined by the hon. Member for Ilford North: they accept competition; they just want fair competition. That is absolutely right. Uber is disruptive by nature, so it will always come in and cause difficulties for a long-established, regulated trade such as black cabs. However, it has to be fair. The pricing has to be fair to drivers and to competition.

Uber does supply something that we have not talked about yet, which is flexibility for drivers. We were talking about the modernisation of the economy last week as a Government, with the release of the Taylor report. A lot of Uber drivers like the flexibility. They like being able to have a few hours here and a few hours there, possibly as a second income to supplement a lower-paid job. It is important that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater when looking at Uber and how to tackle this, to ensure a relatively level playing field for all concerned. The average Uber driver gets about £15 an hour, and we need to look at that in the bigger scheme of things when talking about competition between the two and how drivers are affected.

I totally agree that we must tackle cross-border hiring. I would be interested to know exactly how it would work. The hon. Gentleman talked about cars starting and stopping in a particular regulated area. I live on the outskirts of London. If I lived quarter of a mile further south, I would be in Surrey. I wonder how it would work in those border areas, when we are trying to get out of central London, but the principle is absolutely right. I have the same figures as him, and it cannot be right that we have 69 people coming from Cardiff and 83 people coming from Leeds to drive cabs around London. I do not think it would be too difficult to tackle cross-border hiring between Leeds and London, but maybe Carshalton and central London is a bit different. I would be interested to see how that might work.

I agree that the plying for hire definition needs to be modernised. I would not want it to exclude the competition being established in London, but the grey area needs to be removed, so that everybody knows exactly where they stand. It is all part of the modernisation. I agree as well that the Mayor should have the power to cap the number of private hire licences. I asked the Department

for Transport on 27 April what representations it has had from the Mayor of London on changing the law, so that he can cap that number. The answer came back that the Department has had zero formal representations. I am interested to know what has happened since April and what the Mayor of London has done to push that forward. I would certainly support him on that.

I agree that we need to incentivise the take-up of electric cars. I know that companies such as BluePoint are establishing charging points around London. It would be good to look at how that might work in taxi ranks, so that black cabs could have better access to charging points, rather than them just being for the new generation of private electrical cars.

Finally, it is absolutely right that an English test is being introduced for private hire drivers, but we need to ensure it is measured, practical and does what it needs to, to ensure that drivers can speak to passengers and understand signs. The idea of writing essays about a variety of things seems a little distracting. I would rather see a really practical English test, so that they can do their job.

We need to get the balance right between black cabs and the competition, including Uber. There is a lot to commend in the report, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North once again on his work.

3.7 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). His account was exhaustive, and the work of the all-party group has been extremely helpful. A proper discussion of the issues around the industry is long overdue. I do not want to rehearse the arguments that have been made, but I will make a few observations on some of the things I have learned over almost a decade of trying to understand how the trade works in my area.

Although the APPG's report is excellent, it has a picture of a black cab on the front—it has a London focus, which is entirely reasonable. However, one thing that has struck me as I have gone around the country is how different things are in different places, and how difficult that makes it for us to cope with all the different local circumstances. That is why there will always be a role for the local licensing authority.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who led an Adjournment debate on this subject just over a year ago. He gave a brilliant account, which should almost be obligatory reading for Members as they start to consider this issue. I also pay tribute to the local people in my area who have explained the issue.

The complexity of the issue is shown by the Law Commission report back in May 2014. Whatever one's view of that report, the fact that it ran to nearly 300 pages—I am not sure how many people have got through it from beginning to end; I have started it on a number of occasions on trains—and had 3,000 submissions demonstrates a huge amount of complexity and detail. I will come back to how we respond to it, but as I read it, I found myself thinking about how it applied to my area. I am very grateful to several local people: Paul Bradley and Rashel Mohammed of the Cambridge Hackney Carriage Association, and David Wratten, who works for Cambridge City Licensed Taxis and

[*Daniel Zeichner*]

represents the taxi drivers working from the station. As we begin to look at just one area, we realise how many different groups and interests there are within one trade.

The Local Government Association handbook advises councillors on how to deal with such issues. It runs to a full 60 pages and involves a lot of training. I am grateful to my councillors, Jeremy Benstead, Kevin Blencowe and Gerri Bird, for putting up with simplistic questions from me over the years as I try to understand the issues. I recommend that hon. Members go out with local taxi drivers to understand the job from their point of view and to see some of the problems they face on a daily basis. Many of us use taxis as passengers, but going out with the drivers and hearing them explain what they are up against is a very different thing. I am grateful, particularly to Paul and Rashel, who have taken me out on numerous occasions.

We have hackney carriages in Cambridge, but we do not hail them. It may be different in other places, but they all work from ranks and a lot of them are dual licensed, which causes total confusion in the minds of the public. People really do not understand the difference in a city such as Cambridge, and I think it might be similar in other places. We have a different set of distinctions from London. In many places the cap on numbers for taxis was lifted some years ago. I am pleased to say that the Labour council in Cambridge acted bravely. They went through the process of testing the market and reintroduced the cap a year or two ago, which has helped. We had a massive over-ranking problem, which is typical of historic cities. The problem is not completely solved, but the cap has helped. The problems that we still have are how to deal with basic technological things such as making sure the ranks are filled from feeder ranks.

Also, there is the problem, which was touched on by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), of cross-border issues when neighbouring authorities have different approaches to taxi licensing. That is not untypical. The Cambridge Labour authority takes a rigorous view. The councillors are very hands-on in their approach to managing appeals. However, neighbouring authorities take a different view, which creates a real problem when they are contiguous and we see large numbers of taxis coming in from other areas.

We have also had some self-inflicted problems. The Deregulation Act 2015 created additional problems. The idea that someone's booking can be passed on to someone else might have seemed a good idea in terms of efficiency, but it means people do not know what they are getting. It is like going to a supermarket checkout with a box of Jaffa Cakes that gets substituted for an own brand and being told it is the same thing when it is not. People have told me that they have phoned up to get their taxi—or, in this case, their private hire vehicle—and then someone else has turned up, someone who they did not want to see turning up because they had had problems with them before. In a way, that has taken choice away from the consumer, and I am not sure that was what the Government intended.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North made strong points about the access issues and guide dogs. I have heard about heart-rending cases from people who have told me about disagreements they have had with

taxis drivers who have not exactly welcomed them into their cab with either a guide dog or a wheelchair. As we have heard, progress has been made on that, but more needs to be done. Training is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish tried to introduce a Bill in 2016 to make such training mandatory, so I hope the Government will come back to that.

Another set of issues raised with me around the country are the opaque set of charges for drivers using a rank at a railway station, supermarket, hospital or retail park. All those institutions are now trying to maximise the value of their assets. In the old days, railway stations were places for getting people around, but now they seem to be a source for raising funds. I have asked questions and I still have not had satisfactory answers. The issue is decidedly opaque and we need to make sure that such privileges are not being abused.

A huge range of issues needs to be tackled, as evidenced by the Law Commission report. We have seen the change in technology—I will not re-hearse the arguments. I am not one of those opposed to changing technologies. Technology can be applied in the right way, as Gett and other applications have shown. I hope that in the future we will see such technology used in a transformational way for public transport, not just for taxis and private hire vehicles.

There are so many challenges, yet we still do not seem to have had a response from the Government. I really hope that at some point we will see a substantial piece of legislation introduced to deal with the issues. There is clearly a consensus around the idea of national standards to deal with the cross-border hiring issues. The Local Government Association, the all-party group and many others have called for that, and it was a manifesto promise from my party. It cannot be right that someone denied a licence in one area can turn up on the same streets within a few days, as we have seen in some places around the country, with a licence from somewhere else. That completely undercuts public confidence and frustrates local councillors, who feel they have no enforcement powers. We have to find a way forward. I hope I am not abusing the system, Mr Wilson, if I conclude by saying that I will be presenting a private Member's Bill tomorrow, which I hope will tackle the issues.

3.15 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I like this quote from GMB section secretary, Andy Peters:

"It appears that London has become the licensing centre to send London minicabs all over the UK rendering local councils redundant in taxi licensing."

That about sums it up. In St Albans we have reliable and heavily regulated taxi licensing, but my local taxi drivers have said, "What is the point of being licensed with St Albans if TfL can license drivers?" TfL does not seem to have such high standards. We have heard from other speakers that if someone has lost their licence in one area, they will be denied a licence elsewhere. But it seems TfL is not so picky, because someone denied a licence in St Albans was told to try TfL, which is dreadful. The cost to register with TfL for a private hire driver's licence is £250 plus a medical fee, and registering a vehicle costs an additional £100, so that is a total of £350. In St Albans, the cost to register for a private hire licence is £420.50 plus a medical fee, and registering a

vehicle costs an additional £300, so that is £720.50 plus a medical fee. There is also a driver's knowledge test, which is £95 for a first attempt and £64 thereafter.

It does not take a mathematician to work out that someone might as well hop down the road to London and get a TfL licence if there is no way of stopping drivers coming from there to St Albans, where our drivers are heavily regulated. St Albans drivers have told me that if they infringe their driving licence in any way, shape or form, the licensing authority jumps on them. If there is no point in having our licensing regulations, everybody might as well be licensed with TfL and then work all over the place.

It worries me enormously that when I talk to St Albans District Council, it says that although it is trying to work with London, TfL and Uber vehicles are allowed to come to the district to collect or drop off pre-booked jobs. My taxi drivers have shown me an app that shows where all the Uber cars are, and they are not simply dropping off in St Albans and heading back. They are stopping there. They come first thing in the morning and hover about until someone is looking to book a taxi. I told my local taxi drivers that the problem is young people saying, "I'll get an Uber cab. It's cheaper." But it is cheaper because Uber is not obeying the rules. It is outside the licensing rules and touting for business. It claims to offer a journey within six minutes, but if the driver is supposed to be in London when they start a journey, they could not possibly be in St Albans in six minutes. They hover around in supermarkets and nearby roads and offer cheaper fares.

My council has stated:

"During enforcement checks any TFL or UBER vehicles that are found in the District without pre-booked jobs are advised to go back to the area that they are licensed. We have found that the amount of TFL and UBER vehicles...has declined" when enforcement happens. That is the equivalent of swatting a fly off the rump of a horse. A taxi driver who is in the wrong area is simply asked to go back to where they are supposed to be. Nothing happens as a consequence, so they are all back within a few days. There are not enough licensing officers in St Albans, paid for by the heavy licensing fee, to ensure that we can keep those drivers out of the area. So we have a situation in which my local taxi drivers, many of whom are Bangladeshi, are faced with losing their livelihood.

There are big complaints when Tesco or other such companies move into areas and mop up all the trade. Local authorities can protect themselves from big rapacious companies that hoover up all the vacant premises and suppress other small operators in the area. It seems to me particularly poor form, then, that London can spew out licences and the taxi drivers can go off and, in effect, operate remotely. They are not obeying the spirit of the law, and they certainly have a detrimental impact on taxi facilities in areas such as mine. It worries me that local authorities that can stop numerous shop premises being turned into coffee shops because they think that would alter the area's feel and offer, or deny Tesco a huge superstore because they feel it would draw trade from the city centre, cannot deny a fleet of rapacious Uber taxi drivers in my constituency the right to hover around in the car park, sucking the lifeblood from taxi services.

Maureen, who operates for Gold Line in St Albans, said to me much the same as the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has said: there should be strict

rules that a job must be started in the area where a driver is licensed. There are obviously a lot of journeys from St Albans to Luton and Heathrow airports, and there is no thought of stopping people going out of area, but when a taxi driver turns up in an area and hovers about all day, that is completely outside the regulations that cover their licensed hire vehicle. I am told that operating outside the licensing provision also has the potential to negate their insurance, so young people who think getting into these cars is the cheap option might find, if they were in a car crash or some other kind of accident, that they were not insured.

Unite the union has spearheaded a cross-border taxi campaign against Uber. Frankly I do not care whether the firm concerned is Uber or anyone else. What I am saying is not anti-Uber; it is anti-unfairness in the taxi trade. As for just shooing away taxi drivers who are meant to be licensed and operating in a proper fashion but are found hovering where they are not supposed to be, no licensing authority in the country can afford to be shooing out Uber drivers full-time. If those drivers do not behave and Transport for London will not do anything about it, the Government need to do something. I ask the Minister to look at the matter as a serious issue of unfair business competition and health and safety.

Several hon. Members rose—

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order. I am imposing a four-minute limit on speeches now, because I want to bring in the Front-Bench speakers at half-past 3.

3.22 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for doing so much hard work on the report. I also thank the Cardiff taxi drivers with whom I have worked for a number of years—particularly the members of Taxi Drivers Cardiff—and the GMB union. I draw attention to the relevant declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the GMB for raising these issues with me in the first place, and for working alongside me to get under the skin of what is going on.

At the root of the matter is the fact that drivers tell me they work all the hours God sends, but cannot make a decent living. That comes down to several factors, which break down into three areas. One is drivers' experience with the companies they work for. Another is their experience of dealing with councils, as well as the resources available and the implementation of licensing regulations—but, fundamentally, it is about the powers that councils have. Although powers were recently devolved under the Wales Act 2017, we are dealing with the legacy of legislation that is well over 100 years old and takes us back to the 19th century. Clearly, that is not fit for purpose. The third factor is the wider regulatory environment.

I thank Dragon Veezu, which owns taxi firms across the country, for its willingness to engage. I criticised it in the House some time ago, and since that time we have had some positive and constructive engagement. I welcome the fact that it dealt with some of the charges and unfair fees that drivers faced, for example. A lot of progress is still required in that relationship, but at least we are having a dialogue and there is openness. I welcome that and hope that it will continue.

[Stephen Doughty]

I am also pleased about the engagement that we have had with Cardiff Council in particular. I want to praise the new council leader, Huw Thomas, and the cabinet member, Michael Michael, for their willingness to put the creation of a fair playing field for the Cardiff taxi trade at the heart of their new “Capital Ambitions” document, which was published a couple of weeks ago. There will be a meeting with them shortly to discuss practical methods of implementation.

I also want to praise the Welsh Labour Government for opening up a consultation on the taxi trade in Wales, using their new powers. There have already been meetings between the Economy and Infrastructure Secretary Ken Skates and representatives of the GMB and others. I hope the Cabinet Secretary will listen to the debate, as many of the issues that are being raised are relevant in Wales.

There are four issues that I particularly want to highlight. First, the question of cross-border hires is clearly at the centre of the debate. Many people who have been licensed in neighbouring authorities, at lower standards, and often with lower insurance costs, come in and do all their work in Cardiff. Their cars can be seen parked in Cardiff every week. That is not supposed to be going on. Not only do they undercut the market in Cardiff, but the council often cannot enforce against them because of the regulations. Uber drivers also come in, perhaps using the TfL licences that have been referred to. I have even heard of Uber drivers being paid large sums up front to drive down from London and other cities to Cardiff, effectively to run a loss-making business and undercut the existing Cardiff trade. That is simply unacceptable, and it cannot go on.

The second issue is that it seems absurd not to be able to impose a cap on the number of private hire vehicles. That is clearly at the core of the matter. There is a cap on hackney drivers in Cardiff, but the number of private hire licences has continued to go up. It is simple economics—supply and demand. There are too many taxis in Cardiff, and the result is that each driver gets a much smaller part of the pie, so that they cannot get by on their daily wage.

Thirdly, on the question of a fair playing field, standards are not implemented fairly across authorities. A particular issue is safety glass in cars. Drivers in Cardiff are often asked to remove glass, at their own expense, whereas that is not required in neighbouring authorities.

The fourth issue is taxi companies dealing with such issues as account work and introducing a fair playing field. Those are the issues that drivers in Cardiff want to have addressed, and I hope that the Welsh Government and this Parliament will listen.

3.26 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): This is a hot-button issue for many of my constituents, and it will continue to be so, as it was during the general election campaign, until we sort out a basic framework of fair competition. In my view that would include the capping and regulation of taxis in London, which has been mentioned, the powers afforded to the Mayor of London, and wider issues to do with cross-border hiring and minimum standards across the sector.

Like other hon. Members, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on securing the debate and on all his hard work on the matter since he was elected. Like him, I have many constituents who are black cab drivers, and there is frustration about the effects of deregulation and the lack of effective licensing. There are implications for passenger safety in this city and across the country. There has been a dramatic effect on the livelihoods of many of my constituents and their families. Many cab drivers I know have had their income slashed in the past few years, and many are considering leaving the trade for good. That is tragic for some of the most qualified taxi drivers on the planet, and for the iconic black hackney carriage in this city. This is a big debate.

One point in the introduction to my hon. Friend’s report that is worth mentioning is that there is a tendency to simplify the debate as being about the past versus the future and innovation. In my experience that is not the case. The cab drivers I know and represent have not been afraid of technology or innovation. On the contrary, they have embraced it, but there is a need for a fair, level playing field. Technological innovations cannot be used to destroy drivers’ conditions and residents’ protections. Moreover, big multinational companies cannot be allowed to ride roughshod over our democracy and to undermine, through lobbying and personal connections, attempts to create minimum standards and effective protections in cities such as London.

I want to make three basic points, which have been made earlier and will no doubt be made in the Front-Bench speeches. The first is about the number of minicabs in the capital, and the implications for congestion and pollution. As we have heard, it is estimated that in seven years the number of private hire car drivers has doubled to 120,000. As things stand, TfL is legally obliged to issue a licence to any driver who meets the criteria. We should put a cap on that.

That leads to my second point, about the general licensing environment. The simple reality is that drivers can dodge areas with more robust licensing by gaining a licence from an authority with weaker regulations. So standards designed to keep residents safe are being dodged through the avoidance of other licensing regimes. Minicab drivers should not be able consciously to acquire licences in areas with less stringent conditions.

On the more specific question of cross-border hiring, private hire vehicles are currently not restricted from taking bookings anywhere in England and Wales, provided that the vehicle driver and operator are licensed by the same licensing authority and the booking is accepted within that authority. There is little that licensing authorities can do about drivers who work outside the area for which they are licensed. The obvious question is how licensing authorities can effectively regulate and enforce private hire activity in the areas in question. They cannot. As we have heard, a significant number of London-licensed private hire vehicles appear to be working solely in areas outside the capital, so there appears to be a clear need for the Government to legislate to create a statutory definition of cross-border hiring. Should a journey have to begin or end in the licensing authority area where the licence was issued? That appears to me a pretty sensible suggestion. It would allow flexibility for private hire operators to fulfil passenger requests.

My final point is about national minimum licensing standards. The problems associated with cross-border hiring are linked with variations in licensing standards across the country. In some areas, drivers do not need even a Disclosure and Barring Service check to receive a licence, so drivers are not necessarily screened for criminal convictions before being allowed to carry passengers. Surely we need new minimum licensing standards for all licensing authorities to impose.

Overall, the proposed reforms are pragmatic and sensible. I very much welcome them and support the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North and the coalition that he has assembled.

3.30 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson; I think this is the first time that I have done so. It is probably good news for you and others that I will not take up too much time.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on introducing the debate, on the sterling work that he has clearly done as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis and on producing the report. He started today by saying how iconic the black hackney carriage is in its association with London. I certainly concur with that. When I was growing up, my dad's aunt stayed just outside London, and we certainly associated the hackney carriage with London. The training and knowledge that these drivers have has been well documented in TV series, documentaries and so on.

It does seem a wee bit ironic that at the same time, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Transport for London is clearly undercutting other taxi services around the country in terms of the licences they are issuing. As we heard from the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), that is having a real impact on drivers in her constituency.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) touched on the fact that taxi operation varies from area to area and from country to country. Where I stay, my experience of taxis is that passengers phone local private hire companies; in my licensing area, people are not allowed to flag down vehicles. That makes it harder for unlicensed operators to operate, and it makes the whole start-or-finish issue or cross-border issue a bit more difficult. I am fortunate because I know all the local taxi drivers. I can phone the company and say “It’s Alan. I want to go to x, y or z.” I do not even have to give full details of the address. I can take my pet dog in the car; that is not a problem. That is in stark contrast to the experiences of people who rely on their guide dog because of mobility issues. We have heard about the unsatisfactory experience of people not being able to get their guide dog in cars. I certainly support the call for equality training to ensure that people are not effectively discriminated against, which would be under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

That brings us full circle. It is really important that we do not have a race to the bottom, which is the concern that we have now about Uber and how it operates. The hon. Member for St Albans said that she does not care whether it is Uber or whatever; the bottom line is that there is an issue that we need to address. In Scotland, Uber operates only in Glasgow and Edinburgh; it certainly does not operate in my area, so it is not the same issue as we face here. Clearly, that company has a model, and

once it undercuts people and puts other drivers out of business, it will continue to expand that model elsewhere. As I said, we cannot have a race to the bottom. We have heard about insurance issues. Clearly, some people are getting into these cars and do not understand the wider implications. Yes, they might save a few pennies, but it could cost them in the long run.

The key theme that came out in the debate was that the existing legislation is outdated. I have just touched on the DDA. I agree that there should be penalties for abuse of taxi drivers; they need more protection. Another good point made by the hon. Member for Ilford North was about providing assistance for taxi drivers to upgrade their cars, particularly given air pollution issues. The Government have still to respond to the air pollution case. They have lost three times in the High Court now; they cannot afford to lose in the High Court again. I think that further grant assistance must be given for the upgrading of black cabs, particularly in London. I will throw out one further thing to the Minister. Previously, there was a grant system for conversion to liquefied petroleum gas. I do not think that is available any more, but it is a good interim step towards reducing emissions before we get to zero-carbon transport, so I ask the Government to think again about LPG.

In Scotland, the Scottish National party Government have already made changes to licensing, under the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015. The process began in 2012-13, but even by the time the legislation was going through Parliament, in 2015, it was already recognised that it had not kept pace with technology and the apps system that is now used for taxi drivers. The SNP Government have therefore pledged to review it and bring in changes accordingly. I urge the UK Government to think likewise.

3.35 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to speak in this important debate on the future of the taxi trade. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on securing it. I also congratulate him and the all-party parliamentary group on taxis on publishing the report, “Lessons from London: The future of the UK taxi trade”.

I draw hon. Members’ attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests regarding my membership of the GMB, which organises in this area.

As has been mentioned, all too often debates about the taxi trade in the past have been wrongly framed as innovation versus tradition. It is not the case that there is a trade-off between innovations that improve the taxi trade and regulations that provide protections to the existing trade and deliver improved safety and accessibility for passengers. Sadly, however, the Government’s hands-off approach to taxis and private hire vehicles means that in too many areas we are seeing a race to the bottom on quality, accessibility and, perhaps most worryingly of all, safety.

As technology and the industry have evolved, our regulation of the taxi and private hire industry has failed to keep pace. To address that, the Law Commission published recommendations and a draft Bill in May 2014. The commission recommended significant regulatory changes. The report found that the

[*Cat Smith*]

“balance struck between national and local rules lacks an overarching rationale, resulting in duplication, inconsistencies and considerable difficulties in cross-border enforcement...The outdated legislative framework has become too extensive in some respects, imposing unnecessary burdens on business and artificially restricting the range of services available to consumers; and insufficiently comprehensive in other ways, undermining the fundamental goal of protecting the travelling public.”

The Government have not responded to that report to date. I ask the Minister when he intends to do so, or whether the Government ever intend to respond. We are now at the point at which the Government risk waiting so long to respond that elements of the Law Commission’s work become outdated, and at present the Government have no plans to introduce a taxis Bill.

One significant challenge facing the taxi trade that has yet to be addressed by Ministers is cross-border working by private hire vehicles. There have been increasing concerns about private hire vehicles operating outside their licensed geographical areas. We have heard about that practice in this debate. It puts taxis at a competitive disadvantage, as they have to return to their licensed area after taking a fare outside their borough, unlike private hire vehicles, and some councils in this country hand out too many licences, clogging up the streets and worsening congestion and air quality. Because of the lack of national standards, there are implications for quality, safety and accessibility, which cross-border licensing undermines.

If a private hire driver has obtained a licence by having to pass a local knowledge test in one area, but primarily operates elsewhere, there is no guarantee that they will know the local roads well. There is almost no way a potential customer can know that at the time of booking. The implications for safety are worrying. Local authorities are currently permitted to set their own “fit and proper” criteria for licensing; there is no minimum national standard. Private hire drivers are therefore able to operate in an area with stringent safety criteria, but can legally fail to meet those criteria by obtaining a licence elsewhere. Concerns have been raised about that occurring in Rotherham and Oxford, where strict safety measures were put in place following instances of child sexual exploitation.

The questions of what steps should be taken to ensure passenger safety and how to prevent sexual assaults should not be for each licensing authority to decide, but should be decided at national level on the basis of what regulations would best protect passengers. Rather than addressing the problem, measures in the Government’s Deregulation Act 2015 permitting subcontracting have made the situation worse. Those make enforcement by local licensing authorities more difficult, in addition to stripping customers of their right to choose which operator they wish to travel with. I therefore ask the Minister what steps the Government will take to combat the problems associated with cross-border working. One obvious measure to mitigate the problem would be the introduction of national standards for licensing authorities—something that the Labour party has repeatedly called for. Will the Minister now commit to introducing such standards? The Government have previously stated that many of these issues should be the responsibility of licensing authorities, but issues

such as disabled access and safety standards should not be at the discretion of localities, varying greatly across the country.

While the industry has changed significantly throughout the years, and continues to do so, increasingly spurred on through technological change, legislation has not. As a consequence, the distinction between taxis and private hire vehicles is increasingly confused, in part because of the imprecise concept of plying for hire, which is not defined in statute. The Law Commission’s 2014 report supported this distinction remaining in place; however, we have seen a growing number of apps, such as Uber, that allow users to see the position of available vehicles at any particular moment—in effect, virtually plying for hire. The result has been a reduction in the number of people taking the geographical training for licensed taxi drivers.

The former Mayor of London identified the need for action and planned to introduce a minimum five-minute wait for customers requesting a car and beginning a journey. That was motivated by concerns about the impact that Uber’s business model has had on the city, including Uber’s contribution to rising congestion. Those plans were abandoned, reportedly after intense lobbying by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. As reported in the *Daily Mail*, the then Prime Minister and Chancellor enjoyed close relationships with Uber and were hostile to the idea that the company should be subject to further regulation. The advent of smartphone apps is changing the industry and presents many clear benefits to passengers, but companies such as Uber can enjoy unfair competitive advantages because they do not have to follow the same regulation and compliance as incumbent businesses. The current Mayor of London has committed to supporting a legal definition of plying for hire, and the Law Commission supports a statutory definition of pre-booking. I hope the Government are no longer acting as a paid lobbyist for Uber, and that the Minister will today outline what steps he intends to take to ensure a level playing field between operators.

Everyone in this room wants to see the future of the taxi trade, and indeed the private hire industry, accessible to all. It should therefore concern us all that 42% of assistance dog owners were refused a journey by a taxi or private hire vehicle, despite that being illegal. That has a devastating impact on the confidence and independence of disabled people, and I would like to praise the work of Guide Dogs on this issue. Will the Minister commit to mandatory disability equality training for all taxi and private hire vehicle drivers?

Finally, we have seen real progress in London towards zero emission vehicles. What steps will the Minister take to secure a greener trade across the whole country in future?

3.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): Prejudice gets a worse name than it deserves. Burke said that prejudice

“engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved.”

I seek, I strive, I emule to little more than to match the prejudice of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), whom I congratulate on securing this debate, in his advocacy of the importance of London black cabs. They add quality to our kingdom and are symptomatic

of the best of British and emblematic of its capital's character. The hon. Gentleman should be aware that in anything I subsequently say that is my starting point. We can be proud of our London cabs and should be hesitant about anything that endangers their future, which is certainly not the Government's intention.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that in recent years the taxi and private car hire market has experienced very significant change. That has been particularly true in our capital city. My suspicion is that it is not the end of a process but the beginning. I suspect that we will see continuing change as the ways in which people communicate and acquire services change. He said that it was important not to be stuck in the past. I spend a good deal of my life wishing that I could be, only to be dragged to the present by imperatives and drawn to the future, seduced by the promise of improvement and opportunity. Nevertheless, it is right to say that, whether we like it or not, changing communications are likely to mean that the services provided to us—in this case, by private hire vehicles and taxis—will change too. That does not mean that we should allow ourselves to be seduced—to use the word a second time in a short debate—by the Whiggish idea of progress. It is not true that all technological change is beneficial, and it is not true that all the alterations that the hon. Gentleman set out are likely to add to the quality of what is provided to people in London and elsewhere.

Let me now address some of the specifics in the excellent all-party group report and congratulate the whole of that group on producing it. It is clear to me that we share a common aim: open, safe and fair competition in the taxi and private hire car market. There will be a debate—a proper discussion—about how we can achieve that objective, but it is one to which we can all sign up. I am reassured that in the report there is an appetite to continue to encourage the best of the trade and to seek out ways to improve what is not as good as it should be.

As the hon. Gentleman argued, the Government are responsible for the legislative framework within which licensing authorities set their own standards and requirements, so have an important role to play, but those licensing authorities must play their part too. I will come back to that point, which was raised by the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) when he spoke of inconsistencies, and by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main).

Stephen Doughty: Obviously, that is the case; however, the Minister is aware that the law in this area dates back almost 170 years—some of it is under the Town Police Clauses Act 1847. Given that the Welsh Labour Government are now looking at introducing new legislation to deal with many of the issues we have discussed today, will the Minister make a similar commitment on the UK Government's behalf?

Mr Hayes: Most of what inspires me goes back to the time of Jesus Christ, so I do not think the fact that something goes back a long way is necessarily indicative that it is inappropriate, but I certainly want to make sure that it is fit for purpose. Part of the job of government is to make sure that the legislative framework that we operate in is suitable for the changing circumstances, as I described. If they are as dynamic as the hon. Member for Ilford North and I suggest, we certainly need to

review these matters regularly and thoroughly. He is right that in the light of that changing landscape, we need to look at such things closely.

I am aware of the changing landscape of the taxi and private hire market, and the impact that changes in the way people engage services have for the public and on traditional business models, which, in my own use of taxis, I personally prefer. It is right that we address some of the specific issues raised in the report, and I shall try to do that in the short time available to me. Having said all that, using an app to request a taxi or a private hire vehicle is increasingly popular with the public and has the potential to change the structure of the market significantly. There is a taste for a certain kind of access to a certain kind of vehicle. That is an undeniable fact. I see it among people I know—friends and others—although personally, I prefer to hail a taxi. I like the theatre of that, as well as the quality that it ends in, but that is not the way that everybody goes about their lives and business, and we have to face that reality. Given that appetite, the important thing is that we are mindful of the disadvantages that it might bring too.

It is the case that in addition to accepting pre-booked journeys, taxi drivers have the exclusive right to ply for hire in the area in which they are licensed. This is the fundamental difference in the licensing of taxis and private hire vehicles, and underpins the requirement for taxi drivers to have the geographical knowledge that is indicated, in London at least, by the knowledge—the acquisition of detailed understanding of the character and geography of our city.

The all-party parliamentary group recommends that the Government introduce a legally enforceable statutory definition of plying for hire. That will, of course, be considered, but the Law Commission's view was that it was not practical to define plying for hire:

“No statutory list of factors could be sufficiently determinative to give clear guidance, leaving many of the current grey areas unresolved.”

I welcome the recent efforts of Transport for London to ensure that competition within the taxi and private hire market is fair. Private hire vehicles do not have the hard-earned right to ply for hire, and I wholeheartedly endorse action against those who break the law. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, Transport for London has quadrupled the number of dedicated compliance officers on the street, meaning that there are now more than 250. Not only do those enforcement officers ensure fair play among legitimate parties, they play a vital role in preventing unlicensed, unvetted, uninsured and unsafe drivers and vehicles from circumventing the regulations and stealing business from the legitimate trade.

Mrs Main: The thing is that those officers do not come into the areas where Uber drivers licensed by TfL operate, so the one or two officers in my area have all the responsibility for driving them out.

Mr Hayes: Yes, that is true; my hon. Friend makes a valid point about the scope and powers of those missioned with doing what I described. I am certainly prepared to consider both of those things in direct response to this debate. If these debates are to be meaningful, they must take policy further forward; they must not simply be repetition of the status quo or an opportunity for

[*Mr John Hayes*]

Ministers to read out speeches written for them by other people. We will certainly consider those matters particularly.

Clearly, we place premium importance on passenger safety, and points have been made about that; again, I will re-examine those matters in some detail. The Department has undertaken to monitor the adoption of the recommendations made in the statutory guidance, and I assure all here today that I will give the matter my personal attention. I will be judged on what I do, rather than what I say, so I serve notice on all taxi and PHV licensing authorities that I will be asking those that do not adopt the recommendations made as a result of consultation and engagement why not and for what reasons. I will write to all licensing authorities accordingly as a result of this brief debate.

A point was made about access for disabled people. That point has been raised previously, and I return to it—indeed, I had a discussion this morning with the Minister responsible in my Department about this very subject. We want to say more about it quickly, and we will do so; we have been considering it for some time, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) will know. Again, we have been partly catalysed by the fresh opportunity that this debate gives us to consider these matters.

The other thing that I commit to is further discussion with the all-party group. I invite the hon. Member for Ilford North to come to my Department to explore each of the detailed recommendations in the report. Time does not permit me to go into them now, but I am happy to have a dialogue with him to see what more can be done. By the way, there are some contentious things in the report. I do not want to give the impression that I have read it assuming that it is all fine and dandy. The issue of the difference between licensed vehicles and licensed drivers is—I say this in the kindest, most general way possible—fudged in the report, and we need to explore it. To say that there were 88,000 vehicle licences and 120 licences issued to people is a slight misrepresentation of the facts. I could go on; there is the effect on congestion as well. Light goods vehicles and other vehicles may well do more damage in terms of congestion than the growing number of private hire vehicles, and we need to explore that. However, the report is a useful and valuable contribution to the debate, and we will discuss it and be inspired by much of what it says.

In addition to all of that, there is more work to be done. I have established a working party to look at licensing, and I am extremely keen to deal with the inconsistencies across licensing authorities. There is a strong case for considering the cross-border issues; they are not straightforward, as the hon. Gentleman knows, but we must consider them closely. As I have mentioned, I am keen to move forward on accessibility and how disabled people must sometimes, for example, endure drivers not being prepared to take guide dogs in taxis. That is not acceptable, and it cannot be allowed to continue. The checks put in place by licensing authorities must be thorough and consistent to ensure safety.

I have repeatedly stressed my admiration for black cabs, but I hope also to recognise that it is a dynamic marketplace where technology has changed, and I will continue to do so. To return to the fundamental message

that I want to articulate in this short debate, it is important that the framework that we have put in place is fit for purpose, recognises those changes and preserves the best of what we have now.

There will be a working party, consideration of licensing and cross-border issues, and an urgent meeting with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the report. I am prepared to go further and meet the Mayor of London, representatives of the London taxi trade and, of course, Uber. Devising a plan for the future will require us all to work together for the common good.

I started with Burke, so I will end with Disraeli, who said:

“The secret of success is constancy to purpose.”

My purpose is to get this right, not for its own sake but for the effect that it has on all those who work in the industry and all those who use taxis and private hire vehicles. Our responsibility—indeed, I go further—our duty is to ensure that that is done thoughtfully, carefully and effectively. In securing this debate, the hon. Gentleman has aided that purpose.

3.57 pm

Wes Streeting: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. Having listened to others' remarks, I am minded to draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank all members of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis, the secretariat for their hard work and the sponsors, Gett, mytaxi and the Licensed Taxi Drivers' Association, which are reflected in our group register, for making all the work possible.

I am grateful to the Minister for how he summed up and responded to the debate. All that we can ever hope for as Back Benchers putting the case to Government on various issues is open minds and open doors. I am glad that he has offered both open-mindedness to the range of issues presented and the various challenges of solving those problems and, most importantly, an open door to discuss each of the recommendations, as he has generously offered, so that we can feed back to the thousands of drivers across the country who are following the issue. Of all the issues that I hear about as a constituency MP, there is more, and more consistent, engagement among members of the public on this issue than on any other. As the Minister acknowledged, the drivers whom I represent are more interested in what will be done; I hope that in the autumn, we will start to see some progress. I am glad that work is under way in the Department to secure progress.

I am reflecting on this debate. One ongoing concern that is still with the courts is working conditions and rights for taxi and private hire drivers. We touched on it to some degree—

Mr Hayes: I know that the hon. Gentleman has only a few seconds left. The Taylor review has just been published, and we will consider how it applies to the sector. That is specifically why I set up the second working party. I do not want to pre-judge the courts, but I assure him of that.

Wes Streeting: I agree. Similarly, we did not want to pre-judge the courts when we did our work. I am none the less glad that GMB is pursuing a test case in the courts about the legal status of many private hire drivers.

Self-employment is a great thing; exploitation of self-employment rules by private operators is something else entirely. That is where the tension lies.

With just a few seconds left, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. I look forward to meeting the Minister, and I know that my constituents will be glad to hear about progress thereafter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the taxi trade.

Catfishing and Social Media

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of catfishing and social media.

Catfishing is a growing phenomenon. The internet has brought about many positive changes, but it has also brought the complex challenge of safeguarding people from those who want to deceive and harm them online. A catfish, as everybody knows, is a predator fish that scuttles along the bottom of the ocean feeding on smaller and more vulnerable fish. A human catfish will use another person's online identity to create a fake account and will then try to form relationships online, over social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat, or dating apps such as Tinder. The victim believes that they are communicating with the person whose identity the catfish has stolen. The catfish often deceives another person into an online romance, perhaps getting them to send sexually explicit images or money. However, there is always more than one victim, because as well as those who are deceived by the catfish's fake identity, the person whose identity has been stolen is also a victim.

One in three relationships now starts online. The public should not have to continuously contend with the prospect that the person they are in communication with is not who they say they are. I want to explore how we can better protect victims of catfishing, including the person who has had their identity stolen.

I have been approached by a number of people who have been catfished. Their cases are all different. The extent of catfishing first came to my attention last year when I was informed by the Lady Detective Agency that one of my constituents, Matt Peacock, had had his information used by a man who created fake social media profiles in order to meet women online. Mr Peacock, a male model, has had his identity stolen online for the past four years by the catfish, who has used his pictures on dating websites to lure women. The catfish has also used photographs of Matt's nephews and nieces, claiming that they were his own children in order to appeal to single mothers as being caring.

Matt's family has been put under tremendous strain. His wife has been contacted on many occasions and wrongly told that her husband was cheating on her by asking girls and women for sexual photographs and videos. Matt got so frustrated that he contacted private detective Rebecca Jane Sutton in Manchester for help. Within 48 hours, they tracked down and met the catfish, who admitted using Matt's identity to deceive dozens of women. The man apologised, which, crucially, Matt and Rebecca captured on tape. He also revealed names of other women he had deceived and promised Matt that he would stop doing it. However, just four days after the confrontation, a woman the detective agency had warned about the catfish rang to say that he had contacted her again, pretending to be Matt and asking for graphic videos. Being unable to resolve this, the detective agency contacted Stockport police and handed over all the evidence, including the full taped confession, but the police said that they would not be taking any action because they did not consider any notifiable

[*Ann Coffey*]

crime to have been committed. According to Ms Sutton, the police officer said, “This is the same as going into a bar in the 1980s and pretending to be a millionaire when you actually work on the bins. There is nothing we can do about it.”

But this is not the 1980s. It is 2017, and there is a world of difference between exaggerating one aspect of yourself and creating an identity online that has been stolen from somebody else. Many people tell white lies about their age, occupation or height to seem more attractive to a potential partner, but the difference with catfishing is in the totality of the misrepresentation and the creation of a completely stolen identity with the intention to exploit.

At the moment, there is no specific criminal offence of catfishing. Matt and Ms Sutton are campaigning for a new law to make it illegal to use another person’s identity online. Matt has told me about his disappointment when the police said that no crime had been committed:

“It affected me and my whole family. We spoke to one girl who the ‘catfisher’ had targeted, pretending to be me. She told me she had felt like committing suicide after being deceived by this man. I vowed then to do all I can to sort this out. I do not want a phone call from a girl who has harmed herself after falling for this fraudster who is pretending to be me. Something needs to be done and if people knew pretending to be someone else online was an offence then they might be put off.”

Matt believes that the only way forward is through a new law. He contacted Facebook, which asked him to prove who he was and eventually took the fraudulent page down. However, the next day, the catfish had created another profile, again using pictures of Matt to lure women in. Matt says:

“People of my generation live their lives through social media and trust in an entity that is massively flawed. The law has not kept up and I am determined to do something about it.”

I have also been contacted by other victims of catfishing, including Anna Rowe, who started a petition in February 2017 to make it illegal to create a fake online profile with the intention of using it to make sexual contact. So far, she has collected nearly 42,000 signatures. Anna’s catfish used Facebook accounts, emails, Skype, Snapchat and Instagram accounts to create a fake identity with the background story of a man divorced for 15 months and looking for a meaningful long-term relationship. She eventually discovered that she was in a relationship with a man who had used stolen profiles and was married. Since she publicised her case, Anna has been contacted by many other women who have been deceived by the same man.

In a third case, I was contacted for help by a mother who was worried about the traumatic effect that being catfished had had on her son. The 20-year-old young man, Axel Grassi-Havnen, had been catfished for four months. He has been so upset by the emotional strain it put him under that he has put a video on YouTube to warn other young people to be aware of catfish.

What can be done? Technology is limited in what it can do to deal with persistent catfish who are determined to deceive others and are uncaring of the trauma and emotional distress they inflict. Having a better understanding of privacy settings on Facebook and sharing images only with friends rather than making them public gives some protection, but that does not help people with high public profiles or those who are inexperienced in using social media.

Facebook has launched an initiative in India to counter personal photos being stolen. It has introduced profile picture filters to mark the photograph, because research has shown that a photo marked with a filter is 75% less likely to be stolen. There are now a number of websites for searching someone’s information to confirm their social media profiles and suggest whether they are catfish. A number of dating websites have dedicated fake accounts teams; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat have measures in place so that an account that impersonates somebody can be taken down. Using artificial intelligence to detect fake accounts helps to deal with the enormous challenge that the sheer volume of them poses to identifying and removing them; Facebook announced an initiative in that area earlier this year. Nobody wants to stop people setting up anonymous accounts—they may want to do so to express an identity that they cannot reveal in real life, because of prejudice or discrimination—but there is a difference between that and stealing somebody else’s identity in order to exploit another person.

However, it is very challenging for technology to set up enough barriers to stop the determined catfish. I welcome the work that is already being done by social media websites with internet charities such as the UK Safer Internet Centre and Get Safe Online in promoting awareness of potential risks online and measures that can be taken to prevent individuals from being exploited by catfish. However, more can be done by the social media giants to be proactive in safeguarding people from harm—for example, regularly flashing warning notices about catfish.

The Government’s new digital charter and the Green Paper on internet safety provide an opportunity to arrive at agreements with companies about how to make websites safer. I am pleased that the Government have proposed to work with technology companies and charities to develop the digital charter, which will “seek to balance freedoms with appropriate protections to improve safety online, particularly for children”.

It is important that we have initiatives by Government and by the companies that will work, that are acceptable to users and that develop partnerships with the police and other agencies on the sharing of information.

There is a gap technologically at the moment, but there is also a gap legally. Action Fraud, the UK’s national fraud and cyber-crime reporting centre, estimates that two thirds of all romantic fraud cases begin on online dating websites. In the UK in 2016, there was a record number of romantic fraud cases being reported, with a record £39 million thought to have been given by victims to those they believed to be romantic partners online. These were all cases that involved prosecution for committing financial fraud online, but in the three catfishing cases that I have outlined, it is the emotional trauma caused by someone creating a fake online account that has been particularly damaging.

As I have indicated, there is no specific criminal offence of creating a false profile online. However, such conduct might—depending on the circumstances—fall within one of about six more general criminal offences. The most pertinent to catch catfish include malicious communications. Under section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988, it is an offence for a person to send to another person an electronic communication that conveys

“information which is false and known or believed to be false by the sender”.

Sending false information via electronic communications on social media could fall within this offence, but only if the sender can be shown to have had the purpose of causing distress or anxiety. That would be difficult to prove, and the Crown Prosecution Service would be reluctant to prosecute.

Under section 127 of the Communications Act 2003, it is an offence for a person,

“for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another”,

to

“send...by means of a public electronic communications network, a message that he knows to be false”.

A person who sends a social media message that they know to be false—that is, by pretending to be someone else—could fall within this offence, but only if the sender had the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, which again is difficult to prove.

In 2016, the CPS updated specific prosecution guidelines for cases involving social media communications. The guidelines say that prosecutors should begin by conducting an initial assessment of the content of the communication and the conduct in question, and classifying them in one of four categories. The fourth category refers to communications

“which may be considered grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or false”.

However, the guidelines say that cases that fall within category 4 will be subject to a high evidential threshold and in many cases a prosecution is unlikely to be in the public interest.

We need some clarity in the law, and that could be achieved if stealing another person’s identity, as happened in the case of my constituent, was made an offence. Of course, the argument for adding intent would be that an absolute offence would catch people who were just playing a prank on a friend and were not intending to cause harm, unlike the catfish. However, it is for the police and the CPS to decide on prosecution, and if the accompanying prosecution guidance made clear the scope of the offence, that concern would be overcome.

Creating a new offence of catfishing would have the very desirable effect of making people less likely to steal somebody’s identity online, and it would certainly enable the prosecution of persistent catfish, who cause others such distress, including my constituent and his family over so many years. As yet, we do not even know how many victims that man preyed on or the extent of their emotional distress.

The law has a purpose in reflecting what people know to be wrong and enforcing that through penalties against the person who breaks the law. Catfishing is wrong. As I said earlier, there are huge positives about the internet and the digital revolution, such as instant access to information, the ability to keep in touch with friends and family across the world, and the ability to share interests with people thousands of miles away. There are currently 37 million users of Facebook in the UK, which is 65% of the population over the age of 10. That is a massive number and it is growing. The challenge is to harness the positives of the internet and balance them with the need to protect and safeguard people

from predators. That is not an easy task. People need to be informed and be responsible, but we as a Parliament have a role, as have social media platforms. The digital charter and the Green Paper provide an opportunity both for the development of a real partnership between legislators and technology companies, in order to protect users from aggressive and harmful predators, and for subsequent legislation to outlaw the menace of catfishing.

4.16 pm

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) on securing the debate. I know that this is an important issue for her and for her constituent, Mr Peacock. I am glad that she has brought it to the attention of the House, and I welcome the opportunity both to raise awareness of the problem and, as she has done, to set out clearly the legal position and what might be done about it.

The UK is a world leader in the fight against online abuse, exploitation and harmful content. We take the approach of working in partnership with the technology industry, using legislation where necessary, and we also work with groups across society to ensure that behaviour that would not be tolerated offline cannot thrive online. That is the principle that underpins the internet safety strategy, which is part of the wider digital charter that the hon. Lady mentioned. I listened to her contribution, and I will endeavour to address all the points that she raised in my response.

I will start by saying that I agree with her about the vital need to balance freedom and responsibility online, so that we can enjoy all the benefits of the internet but try to mitigate the harms and harmful practices that the internet has allowed to come about.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Like the Minister, I first pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) for an absolutely superb exposition not only of her constituent’s case but of the wider situation.

Members listening to and participating in this debate would like the Minister to address a couple of points. First, there is no excuse whatsoever for people taking someone else’s identity online. Such behaviour is reprehensible and creates two potential victims. The hon. Member for Stockport outlined how the law has proved to be absolutely deficient so far in this area. I am not one for jumping to legal remedy, but the lack of legal redress for her constituent is obvious, and the Government need to look at that situation carefully and sympathetically.

Matt Hancock: That is an important point, and I will come on to it later.

The internet brings benefits, but also the new challenges that we are considering. The central point is that fraud, whether it is committed online or offline, can cause serious damage, and fraud includes identity theft. Victims can suffer both financial and emotional harm, and we know that fraudsters not only make money but exploit social relationships. Both those things need to be taken seriously.

The Fraud Act 2006 already includes offences that would apply to anyone who assumes a false or non-existent identity to commit fraud. In particular, section 2 sets out the crime of fraud by false representation, which would cover a person pretending to be someone else for

[*Matt Hancock*]

the purposes of making a gain for himself or another. That obviously applies in the online world, too. The use of a false identity for fraudulent purposes is a crime, but identify theft in and of itself is not a criminal offence, which speaks to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Lord) raised about taking someone else's identity. That is the situation as we find it.

Perhaps I should go through some of the things the Government are considering to try to address the problem. First, there is the question of raising awareness of identity fraud. Identity fraud and wider cyber-crime are important issues. We need to ensure that people understand the safer behaviours they can use online. The hon. Member for Stockport mentioned the UK Safer Internet Centre and Get Safe Online, which provide advice on relationship scams and online dating issues. Get Safe Online is an independent organisation funded by industry and Government to ensure that there is a place to go for high-quality advice. Often even basic research, such as checking social media sites or using search facilities, can help in checking whether a person is actually who they say they are.

We expect websites, including social media companies, to respond quickly to reports of harmful content and abusive behaviour on their networks. That includes having easy-to-use reporting tools and robust processes in place to respond promptly when abuse is reported, including the suspension or termination of the accounts of those who do not comply with acceptable use policies. As the hon. Lady said, social media companies are taking some action using people and artificial intelligence, but it is clearly not solving the whole problem.

We have taken action to tackle online harms through legislation where necessary, including in relation to cyber-stalking, harassment and perpetrators using grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. We have introduced a new law making the fast-growing incidence of revenge porn a specific criminal offence, which is what the hon. Lady is seeking. The most relevant legislation is the Malicious Communications Act 1988, which contains the offence of sending material, including electronic communications, to another person that is false and known or believed to be false by the sender, with the purpose of causing distress or anxiety to the recipient or any other person to whom it is intended to be communicated. The Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 made changes to that offence, and to section 127 of the Communications Act 2003. The changes were aimed at ensuring that people who commit those offences are prosecuted and properly punished. Where there is emotional abuse, it might be captured under the domestic abuse offence of controlling or coercive behaviour. That is the legal position.

The Crown Prosecution Service has revised its guidelines on social media to incorporate new and emerging crimes being committed online. Advice was added to the guidelines about the use of false online profiles and websites with false and damaging information. For example, it may be a criminal offence if a profile is created under the name of the victim with fake information uploaded that, if believed, could damage their reputation and humiliate them. Whether the CPS prosecutes any offence will depend on it meeting the evidential and public interest tests in the “Code for Crown Prosecutors”.

The Digital Economy Act 2017 requires us to publish a code of practice for social media companies. We have not yet published it, but we are required to, so we are working on it. The code of practice will include guidance on arrangements for notification by users; the process for dealing with notifications; terms and conditions in relation to those arrangements and processes; and the giving of information to the public about the action providers take against harmful behaviour. We will be consulting on that shortly.

The hon. Lady said that no one is seeking to end anonymity. It is interesting that on some social media sites anonymity is not allowed or made very difficult, but that is not true across the board. For instance, we welcome Facebook’s real name policy, which requires all its users to provide their real and full name when signing up. Claiming to be another person, creating a false presence or creating multiple profiles goes against Facebook’s terms and conditions, but that is not the case for all social media sites. Policing such things is incredibly important, but there is collaboration between social media sites and dating sites to link up online presences. For example, Tinder allows users to link their accounts with other forms of social media, such as Facebook or Instagram. That can help, and we welcome such things, but it is not necessarily for Government to tell social networks how their facilities should work. The very nature of social networks is that they are designed for people to share information, but all social networks are expected to act responsibly to protect the privacy of users. Getting the balance right between freedom and safety online is a key part of the internet safety strategy and the digital charter.

Mr Lord: I have been listening carefully to the Minister’s remarks. A minute or so ago, I think he said that if the victim—in other words, the person whose identity has been stolen—has reputational damage, that is potentially a criminal offence. I cannot think of anything worse than that damage. In this case, it was proven that this man’s identity was taken and that multiple women—perhaps many women—were contacted and asked for graphic and sexual images of themselves.

Ann Coffey indicated assent.

Mr Lord: I see the hon. Lady is nodding. Either the law is deficient, or the police and the CPS are giving the wrong advice to her constituent. Things need to be tightened up.

Matt Hancock: As I said, the CPS guidance in this area has been updated, because technology moves fast and the CPS has to update its guidance and interpretation of the law from time to time. My hon. Friend is exactly right in what he said and in reporting what I said, which will be in *Hansard*, but I said it as a conditional—such activity could be a criminal offence, because it depends on potential prosecutions. It is not for this place to determine guilt or innocence; it is for this place to determine what the law should be.

The guidance was updated fairly recently, and we need to see the impact of that, but my hon. Friend should rest assured that we put in place the internet safety strategy to look broadly at the impact of the internet and ensure that we protect the freedom, innovations and magnificent improvements that it brings to many areas of life, while doing that in a safe way that protects

people from harm. Freedom exists within a framework of protecting others from harm, hence why the internet safety strategy will look into all these issues. Since I am responsible for that strategy and have heard the debate today and looked into the case in preparing for the debate, I will ensure that the issue of catfishing is considered.

There have been movements in this area, and I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Stockport and my hon. Friend the Member for Woking to ensure that the victims of catfishing, who can suffer both financial and emotional harm, have their voices properly heard. They need a strong response to ensure that the law is properly and appropriately up to date to deal with the challenges that the internet has brought in this area and in this case. We have to learn the lessons. I hope that I have provided assurance that we take harm caused online extremely seriously, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to find the solution.

Question put and agreed to.

British Prisoners in Iran

4.30 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered British prisoners in Iran.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Many hon. Members, and many people watching the debate across the world, will be aware in some sort of manner of my constituent Nazanin Ratcliffe. The reason I called this debate—why I think it is important to discuss the issue in the House—is that many hon. Members here and people around the world may not know the details of Nazanin’s condition and that of other such prisoners who are detained in Iran at the moment.

Nazanin Ratcliffe, her husband Richard and daughter Gabriella lived in West Hampstead until April last year. Nazanin went to work every day in a charity. On the weekends, Richard and Nazanin would take their daughter to play in a soft play area in the Sheriff Centre opposite West Hampstead tube. They would play on the swings in a park in Fortune Green, near my house. The biggest worry in their lives in the early months of last year was which school Gabriella would go to when she grew up. Their situation was not any different to many of the young families who live in my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn.

Last year, Nazanin, a British citizen, went to Iran on holiday and took her daughter Gabriella, who was then two years old and is also a British citizen, to see Nazanin’s parents in Tehran. After two weeks, they decided to return home to London. Nazanin was detained at the airport in Tehran and the daughter was placed with the grandparents.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Nazanin is a British citizen and I understand that she also has Iranian citizenship. Obviously, the Iranians do not recognise her British citizenship. As far as they are concerned, she is Iranian, so we have a real problem in trying to influence the Iranian authorities. Have I got that wrong?

Tulip Siddiq: That is no excuse for evading responsibility for a young mother, a British citizen, who has been detained in Iran, and a three-year-old daughter who has been separated from her mother and father. Those excuses are used by the Government to evade responsibility.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I apologise, Mr Hollobone, as I will have to leave this debate early for another engagement. I congratulate the hon. Lady on introducing this timely and important debate. Is it not the case that Nazanin Ratcliffe’s situation is symptomatic of a regime that is systematically abusing human rights? If the Supreme Leader and the re-elected President Rouhani want to learn anything, they should look back to the history of ancient Persia and King Cyrus, who founded the first ever fundamental charter of human rights, a facsimile of which currently sits in the UN building in New York. They should look back for leadership—and also look forward and get into the international norms of human rights, not just for British or joint citizens but for Iranian citizens as well.

Tulip Siddiq: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are problems with Iran as a whole in terms of human rights. In this debate, I will concentrate on my constituent Nazanin, and Kamal Foroughi, who the hon. Gentleman may be aware of.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Nazanin's sister-in-law lives in my constituency. She sent me a letter signed by a number of my constituents. It says:

"As part of her family we have been tirelessly campaigning for the British Government to do more than just raising their concern about her treatment and the effective abandonment of her young daughter Gabriella in Iran."

Does my hon. Friend join me in calling on the British Government to do far more?

Tulip Siddiq: I will call on the British Government to do a lot more.

John Howell (Henley) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) *rose—*

Tulip Siddiq: I am going to make some progress before taking interventions. I know that a lot of hon. Members want to come in and I will take interventions. Before I do that, I want to outline the plight of my constituent Nazanin.

Gabriella's short life has already been spent in exile. After they were unlawfully detained at the airport, what followed was a shambolic process of secretive courts, secretive trials and secretive convictions. Nazanin was placed in solitary confinement, in a room one and a half metres square, with no window and no natural light, and with no access to lawyers or to her family. Before Nazanin went to prison, she was in perfectly good health. We then found out that she had suffered from arthritis in her neck and body. There were times when her limbs stopped working and she could not move for periods of time. She suffered from weight loss and hair loss. She was often denied access to medical treatment. The one time she did have access to a specialist, he said that Nazanin needed urgent hospitalisation.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I am particularly concerned about the continued incarceration of my constituent Roya Nobakht, who is being held in Evin prison, having been charged with gathering and participation with intent to commit crime against national security, due to a comment on Facebook. Will the hon. Lady join me in calling on all the authorities to ensure that appropriate medical attention and health assistance is always available for our constituents?

Tulip Siddiq: I will mention the hon. Lady's constituent later in my speech. I agree with her about access to medical treatment, but it is not just physical treatment, as hon. Members will be aware. Mr Hollobone, I am sure you will agree that if a woman is separated from her husband, her daughter and her family, it has an impact on her mental health as well. Through the monitored conversations that Nazanin has with her family, we are aware that she has been suicidal and has gone on hunger strike.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband, has immediate family in my constituency. The way Nazanin has been treated is dreadful. Will my hon. Friend also consider how Richard has been treated, since he is now separated not only from his wife but from his daughter?

Tulip Siddiq: Richard Ratcliffe lives about 10 minutes down the road from me. Theirs is a family I can relate to. It is like many young families in my constituency. I am pleased to say that Richard is in the Public Gallery today listening to the debate. He has been tirelessly campaigning for the release of his wife and daughter since they were detained.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She is well aware of the circumstances in Iran of Mr Foroughi, whose son is a constituent of mine; both families have been working very closely together. She makes an eloquent point about the humanitarian treatment of the detainees, in particular the medical treatment. Does she agree that it is not just that they should get treatment but that once the assessment has been undertaken or the treatment has been given, the results should be shared with the family? I know that in Mr Foroughi's case the trauma has been increased by the lack of knowledge of the outcome of the medical examination.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for coming with me to deliver a petition to the Foreign Secretary. I agree that the toll taken on the families of those who are held in Iran, who have no contact with their families other than monitored calls, is really shown when speaking to and meeting members of the families. That is, if people bother to meet with them.

Thousands of people in the world have spoken out because of the sheer level of injustice in Nazanin's case. Led by Richard Ratcliffe, organisations such as Amnesty International, Redress and Change.org have galvanised thousands of people to campaign for the release of Nazanin. At this time, almost a million people have signed a petition saying that Nazanin should be released. Six UN rapporteurs have also said that Nazanin should be released, and the European Parliament has adopted a resolution to say that Nazanin and other EU citizens with dual nationalities should be released.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this issue to the House of Commons and asking the Government to do something about it. Last November, an article in *The Sunday Times* suggested that these political prisoners were being tortured and, more importantly, that Iran seeks a ransom from the British Government of £400 million. What does my hon. Friend make of that? Surely it is diabolical, to say the least.

Tulip Siddiq: That is very worrying. The problem is that, when the families speak to prisoners of conscience in Iran, the calls are heavily monitored and there is no freedom to express exactly what is happening. It is all shrouded in secrecy, so there is no real evidence of what is going on behind closed doors. It is no surprise that the UN working group on arbitrary detention said that the detention was unlawful, arbitrary and against international law.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have listened to that shocking case. Does she agree that it is incumbent on our Government to do far more to seek the release of those people?

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend anticipates the conclusion of my speech, when I will ask the Government and the Minister to do more to release not just Nazanin but Mr Foroughi, Roya and all other prisoners of conscience who have been held in Iran for so long. I have tried my best to raise this matter in the House as much as possible with the two Foreign Secretaries who have been in office in the time that Nazanin has been in prison. This is the second Minister with responsibility for the middle east I have addressed about this issue. I also raised it at Prime Minister’s questions, and the Prime Minister said that she had raised the case with the Iranian President, but she did not go into whether she would call for Nazanin’s release.

John Howell: I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She is being very generous with her time. She is describing a scandalous systematic abuse of human rights in Iran. Does she accept that, when the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 was put together, we missed an opportunity to put a human rights clause in there? In the two years since it was signed, there has been no improvement at all in Iran’s activities.

Tulip Siddiq: I agree that it was a missed opportunity, but there have been other big missed opportunities, including a visit by diplomats to Evin prison, which I shall talk about later.

To mark Nazanin’s 100 days of detention, Richard Ratcliffe and I went to No. 10 when David Cameron was Prime Minister and handed in a petition. With the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), we went to the Foreign Secretary’s office to deliver a petition signed by 261 MPs and peers calling for Nazanin’s release. I have tried to raise this issue as much as possible in the House, especially during the International Women’s Day debate, in which the rights of women were examined over and over by Members of the Opposition but Nazanin’s case was largely ignored. It has been raised in the House several times, and people are worried about it, but the Government, to their shame, have not echoed the calls for Nazanin’s release.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the elements of this case that the family cannot understand is why the Foreign Secretary and the former Foreign Secretary have not taken the time to meet Richard and the family? I know Ministers have, but surely the Foreign Secretary can give a case of this seriousness some of his personal time.

Tulip Siddiq: That is something the families have raised with me over and over again. Why will the Foreign Secretary not meet with the families? Let me be clear: we do not doubt the sincerity of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff, but the fact is that this is not working. The Foreign Secretary needs to meet the families.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. She is being very generous with her time.

It seems to me that the Foreign Office has behaved somewhat defensively in relation to this case and others. Given that there are 600,000 dual nationals in Britain, this is not going to be a single issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need urgently to develop a policy on diplomatic support for dual nationals? Currently, we seem to be responding to the Iranian Government’s appalling policies and behaviour with poor treatment.

Tulip Siddiq: I am highlighting just one case, but there are many more involving people with dual nationalities. At the end of the day, they are still British citizens, and we have to give them the respect and time they deserve.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Tulip Siddiq: Just before I do, I would like to ask the Minister a few questions, which I hope he will answer in his speech. First, it remains incomprehensible that our Government are yet to call for Nazanin’s release, and that they have failed to join the UN in maintaining her innocence. As I said, 261 MPs and peers signed a letter seeking the release of Nazanin, Kamal Foroughi and Roya Nobakht. Will the Government finally join them today?

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Lady is making a compelling case. It is perhaps unsurprising that Iran is not receptive to the United Kingdom Government’s overtures, but may I remind her and the Minister that we have many allies in the region, and that we could be doing more to get them to assist us in making representations to Iran in that regard?

Tulip Siddiq: This is a matter of life and death, and we should be relying on any allies and friends we have in the region to try to get our prisoners of conscience released.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend think, therefore, that it might be useful for the Foreign Office to talk to Ministers in the Department for International Trade, who seem to be intent on developing a relationship with Iran? If they can speak about trade, perhaps we can talk about human rights.

Tulip Siddiq: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a good point, as usual. That is something I will be asking the Minister to address in his conclusion.

Secondly, given the seriousness with which the Government say they are treating Nazanin’s case, is it acceptable that the Foreign Secretary is yet to meet with her family? They are told that he raises concerns with Foreign Minister Zarif, but a meeting would reassure them of progress. Will the Minister help me to get a meeting between the families of those prisoners of conscience and the Foreign Secretary?

Thirdly, last year, Amnesty International produced a report on Iran’s prisons, which highlighted 17 cases in which

“The Iranian authorities are callously toying with the lives of political prisoners by denying them adequate medical care—putting them at risk of irreversible damage to their health or even death”. Will the Minister therefore clarify the role of the 45 diplomats who recently went on a visit to Evin prison—the very prison in which Nazanin is being

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

held—and were given a tour to show them how well prisoners are treated? That consular team, which is denied access to Nazanin and Kamal Foroughi because they are dual nationals, was sitting literally outside the cell in which Nazanin is being held, exchanging pleasantries, drinking refreshments and taking photos, and yet they did not help her. Did they ask to see her? If not, why not? Does the Minister agree that it is outrageous for our Government to take part in a public relations stunt, in which diplomats go to Evin prison and take pictures at the very location where human rights abuses are taking place? I would like the Minister to respond to that question. Will he ask for a full report from the embassy in Tehran, which was reinstated recently?

I would like to ask the Minister some broader policy questions, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) raised, about the implications for those with dual nationalities. Nazanin has been denied justice at every turn during her 14-month ordeal, but she is not the only British dual national to be detained in Iran—Kamal Foroughi and Roya have already been mentioned. The treatment of British prisoners in Iran speaks to the need for a review of the Government's broader policy towards dual nationals who are detained abroad. If we accept the status quo, we are accepting that the way Nazanin and Kamal are being treated is okay. That is not acceptable for many Members of this House.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and on her eloquent speech. She is keen for the Government to act after a period of delay. Would it help her to know that many constituents have written to me and to my Scottish National party colleagues, so many British citizens in Scotland are keen for the Government to act? A couple of weeks ago, I wrote to the Secretary of State about that on behalf of the SNP, and I am waiting to hear back from him. Would it help the hon. Lady to know that constituents of hon. Members throughout the United Kingdom are anxious for those people with dual British citizenship to be assisted by our Government?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her intervention. A full Public Gallery and the number of emails received by hon. Members show how strongly people feel about the sheer injustice of this case. Facebook groups of which I am a member, Hampstead Mums and Mums of West Hampstead, normally never get in touch with their MP, but they have been in touch about this case, because it resonates with people and it is so unfair—the Government need to do more.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I know the commitment that the hon. Lady has to raising awareness of this case. As chair of the all-party group for women in Parliament, I have seen her raising the issue in the Chamber. Constituents have also written to me, as have others from across the country, in support of this debate and to express concern about the heartbreaking and awful situation of a very small child and her family. May I take this opportunity to support the hon. Lady, and to ask the Minister, who I know is extremely caring, to ensure that our Government do everything in their power to make changes in this and the other cases we have heard about this afternoon?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and her support. I thank all Members from across the House who have pledged their support. This is not a party political issue; this is about constructive working to ensure that we achieve the release of prisoners of conscience who are our citizens.

I have a few more questions for the Minister to answer in his summing up. Will the Government state that there should be no exception to taking clearly documented action on behalf of all UK nationals who face breaches of their human rights? According to a 2011 report by the Office for National Statistics—my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham mentioned this figure—more than 600,000 people living in Britain hold another passport. They are of course not at risk of being detained, but we need to address deficiencies in our law to ensure equal protection for dual nationals.

Will the Government commit to making complaints about all breaches of the Vienna convention on consular relations, and consider bringing cases before the International Court of Justice if such breaches continue? Furthermore, will the Government bring the strongest possible pressure to bear on Iran to cease its pattern of arbitrary detention of dual nationals? Will the Government support and work towards the implementation of any findings of the United Nations monitoring bodies concerning UK nationals?

Finally, will the Government accept that there is a fundamental accountability gap between what the Foreign Office says it is doing and what the families can know is happening to their relatives? Families cannot be left in the dark about the framework of work that exists when their relatives are treated in such a way. A Foreign Office approach of discretion encourages inertia, but also defines the kind of foreign policy that the Government are mandated to deliver.

The Conservative manifesto states that the party believes in the values of “freedom, democracy, tolerance and the rule of law” around the world. When I asked about this case at Prime Minister’s questions, she said that she was concerned about the effect that detention was having on Nazanin. Pat Frankland, who is apparently a good friend of the Prime Minister, said that her politics and morals are based on Christian values, of being decent, “not doing people down” and looking after people, so I ask the Prime Minister, and the Minister, to do the decent thing. I am asking them to do more—to do more to restore this family who have been ripped apart by a senseless miscarriage of justice; to do more to bring this toddler back together with her family, her mother and father, before even more of her childhood is blighted; and to do more to bring Nazanin, Kamal and Roya home to the UK where they belong.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate finishes at 5.30 pm. Four Members have written to me requesting to speak. I have to call the Front Benchers no later than seven minutes past 5, and there will be five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesman, five minutes for the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister. Tulip Siddiq will then have three minutes to sum up at the end. I will therefore have to impose a three-minute time limit on our four speakers, the first of whom will be John Howell.

4.54 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on her excellent speech and on securing this brilliant debate. She did not comment on another British value—a belief in human rights. I have a fundamental belief in human rights, but Iran is not a place where human rights are prevalent.

Human rights were not discussed at all during the P5+1 nuclear negotiations with Iran, in spite of Iran having one of the worst human rights records on this planet. In per capita terms, Iran leads the world in executions, and overall is second only to China. In Iran, moreover, it is mandatory for all women to veil their hair, homosexuality is illegal—I could go on and on.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing this crucial debate. My hon. Friend is making some important points, and I want to add one. An important human right is that of legal representation to ensure access to justice. One of the most horrifying aspects of both Nazanin and Kamal’s cases is the absence of that legal advice. Will he comment on that?

John Howell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress that point.

At least three British citizens are detained in Iran. I have heard that a fourth person, whose name I do not know, has also been detained. We will have to see who that person is. Those four people stand in great contrast to the four Americans who were released from Iranian prisons in 2016 as part of a prisoner swap that came about following the Iran nuclear agreement. Nothing similar has occurred with regard to those Britons who have been detained in Iran over the same period.

In the few seconds I have left, I make the point that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn fully identified the reasons why we need those people released. It is fine to hear warm words from the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, but we need to see action on those words. We need a real release of prisoners from Iran as quickly as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I have had a late request to speak from a Member who has a constituent interest, so I will have to cut everyone’s time limit from three minutes to two minutes to get him in.

4.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on putting a very good case forward. When I consider international issues, there is a phrase that resounds in my heart: evil triumphs when good people do nothing. We cannot fix the world’s problems, but I believe that we have a role to play in this case and that we can bring about change.

Nazanin Ratcliffe has been jailed for five years under secret charges and is being held in solitary confinement. In September 2016, the Foreign Secretary said that the “upgrade in diplomatic relations” between the UK and Iran would provide an opportunity to raise consular cases “about which I am deeply concerned”.

Will the Minister further outline how he believes that our recently restored diplomatic ties have enabled us to influence such matters?

May I also put a marker down for Kamal Foroughi, who has been arrested and kept in solitary confinement in Iran for six years after being convicted of spurious charges? Iran has been desperately hard on him and in detaining British citizens and denying them their basic rights.

Iran executed some 977 people in 2015 and an estimated one per day in 2016. The regime continues to execute juvenile offenders, in violation of international law. If there are human rights abuses, this is a country that does them with a vengeance. It executed 73 juvenile offenders between 2005 and 2015, and girls are held criminally accountable from the age of nine. The Government deem them to have reached puberty at that age, compared with 15 for boys. I ask this question again: where are the human rights in Iran, given what it does to young children from the age of nine? The nuclear deal failed to address a number of critical issues. I respect the Minister greatly, as he knows, but I ask him that question again given Iran’s human rights abuses and the fact that it gave Hezbollah, which controls Lebanon, rocket factories. These are deep issues that we are all concerned about. The human rights abuse in Iran is despicable, and young people of all ages are held in little regard. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

4.59 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this important debate. It seems that this matter hinges on dual nationality, which is the barrier to the British Government being able to provide the services that we would expect them to provide to any British citizen. That is not good enough. We need to find ways forward.

I respect the Minister and his predecessor, who have always honestly set out that they are doing what they can diplomatically. The alternative, which I am sure no one would advocate, is to send in gunboats. The reality of the situation is that we either use force or work through the appropriate channels, as the Minister’s predecessor did and I know he will too. I simply ask him, exactly as the hon. Lady did, to do more. I ask him to redouble our efforts to ensure that the Iranian Government are under no illusion about where we stand, and to continue to provide as much consular assistance as possible under the diplomatic arrangements that we have.

I turn to a slightly different point, which was made earlier. The Governments of the P5+1 made an agreement to lift sanctions, and the majority of international sanctions were lifted, with near-immediate effect, in January 2016. Given that, we have lost the leverage that we need, so I urge the Government to work with our allies—not just those in the region but President Trump in the United States, who criticised that deal for removing leverage.

5.1 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to make my first speech in Westminster Hall. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing the debate and introducing it in such a comprehensive manner.

[Alex Sobel]

I have received more than 100 emails from constituents about this matter, which shows that the cases of Nazanin and Kamal have touched the hearts of the nation. It is all too common for people to claim that a situation is Kafkaesque, but to me, as an avid reader of Kafka, the similarities between those cases and the case of Josef K. in “The Trial” are all too apparent. Kafka himself described the seeming basis of the Iranian judicial system when he wrote in “The Trial” that “it’s characteristic of this judicial system that a man is condemned not only when he’s innocent but also in ignorance.”

Both Nazanin and Kamal were charged and convicted without adequate representation or due process—indeed, they were condemned in ignorance.

Like other hon. Members—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn—I call upon the Foreign Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Minister to press the Iranian Government on a number of issues that my constituents, Amnesty International and I have raised. They should press them to allow Kamal and Nazanin any specialist medical care they may require; give Kamal access to his medical records; apply without discrimination article 58 of the Islamic penal code, which allows for someone to be conditionally released after serving a third of their prison sentence and would ensure the immediate release of Nazanin and Kamal; ensure that Kamal and Nazanin have regular access to a lawyer of their choice; allow them to be in contact with their families, including relatives abroad; and allow them to communicate with British consular officials—although that seems to be a contentious issue. I ask the Minister to respond to those points.

The United Kingdom has a well-deserved international reputation for its justice system. I hope that the Government will press for the most basic justice in Iran for our citizens, whether they are British citizens or dual citizens, and particularly for Kamal and Nazanin. It is clear from the contributions to this debate that that is completely and utterly lacking.

5.3 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Thank you for finding time to accommodate me, Mr Hollobone. I apologise for my lack of proper notice.

I want to talk briefly about the case of Mr Foroughi, whose son is a constituent of mine. I have been involved extensively with the campaign that we have run jointly with the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) to secure the release of Mr Foroughi and others.

There are many similarities between the cases that have been mentioned, but Mr Foroughi is a 78-year-old man. He really is an old man, and he is an ill man. He has been detained for more than 2,000 days. He is the longest-serving European national in a prison in Iran. There are many questions about his detention, but in the short term, there are genuine humanitarian issues for the Iranian Government, principally about his health and the need for them to share his medical files, which would at least provide some comfort.

I know that the British Government have raised this issue at every level. I used to work for Prime Minister David Cameron, and I know that he raised it directly

with his opposite number, as have the current Prime Minister and Ministers at other levels. However, I would be grateful if the Minister addressed three matters that have been brought out during the debate.

First, there are genuine questions about the EU delegation. It seems extraordinary that it could have been just outside where these people were detained, and that has caused a lot of anguish. Secondly and thirdly, on trade and the nuclear deal, I seek guidance, reassurance and information from the Minister about what we are doing to try to leverage opportunities. I was always sceptical about that deal, but I hoped that it would provide an opportunity to improve Iran’s humanitarian record. That does not seem to be happening, so any further guidance that he can give would be gratefully received.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. The guideline time limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for the Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.6 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to be back in Westminster Hall. I am grateful to the voters of Glasgow North for giving me this opportunity. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this important debate so early in the Parliament.

The cases we have heard about today, particularly those of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi, are of huge concern to constituents and campaigners across the country. Like almost everyone in the room, I have received at least dozens of emails from constituents, individual campaigners and organisations calling for the prisoners to be set free. I pay tribute to those campaigners, and particularly to the families of Nazanin and Kamal, who have to live daily with the reality of their loved ones being imprisoned yet refuse to give up the fight.

I also want to recognise other UK citizens detained overseas whose cases have been discussed before in Westminster Hall. They include Andy Tsege in Ethiopia and other prisoners of conscience around the world, such as Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia, whose wife I had the privilege of meeting during the recent general election campaign. In all these situations, we see a particular injustice and a personal cause that ought to be rectified, but we also see wider questions about the UK’s diplomacy, its foreign policy and, ultimately, its role in the world.

We have heard about the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been detained for more than a year. Her final appeal against her five-year sentence, which was originally handed down in a secret trial on unspecified charges, was rejected in April by the supreme court. We have heard about how she was lifted without warning in Tehran airport, and how her physical and mental health continues to deteriorate during her incarceration. Her employer, Monique Villa, chief executive officer of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, recently told *The Guardian*:

“She is not a spy, but an innocent mother who travelled to Iran only to show her baby to her parents”.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has thousands of supporters across this country. In previous debates, I have mentioned

seeing and hearing the demonstrations that have taken place outside Parliament in solidarity with Nazanin, and both her case and Kamal's have been raised with me by my local Amnesty group, yet the UK Government's response is still lacking. I will ask specific questions, but I note the comments of Nazanin's husband, Richard, who told *The Guardian*:

"As her husband, I can say Nazanin is innocent until I am blue in the face. I have spent a year doing it...But it makes a clear difference that the government"—

that is the UK Government—

"hasn't. It indulges the whispers."

I turn to the case of Kamal Foroughi—"Grandpa Kamal", as he is known. I had the privilege of meeting Kamran, who is a constituent of the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and is here today. Kamal Foroughi was first detained in 2011 and was convicted at an unfair trial on charges that he did not know about until the day of his trial. His situation has been described by the UN working group on arbitrary detention, which has called for his immediate release, as a "violation of international law". Once again, there are serious concerns about his health and wellbeing, and his access to communication with his family and the outside world has been severely limited. As I said, I had the privilege before the election of meeting Kamran Foroughi, and that brought home to me the human dimension in all this—the personal struggle, the lives affected and the simple wish of the family to have their grandpa brought home.

I echo all the questions that have been asked of the Minister already. As I said, as is so often the case with prisoners of conscience, there are both personal situations and broader policy issues. What engagement have the Government had with the families of the prisoners? What channels of communication remain open to them? Do the Government accept and understand the huge public concern about the cases, and that it is clear from the cross-party show of support from Members that they would have huge support if they stepped up their efforts to secure the release of Nazanin and Kamal?

The Prime Minister recently called on us all to work together, come to consensus and find things we can agree on. Here, surely, is an example of that. We hear repeatedly from Ministers that they raise issues with the Iranian regime—what does "raise" mean? Do they explicitly call for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi? Will the Minister do so here today?

Do the Government pass on the concerns raised in these debates? Do they suggest to the Iranian regime that if they want to continue to build global good will and make progress on the journey they began with the nuclear deal, recognising international concern about their prisoners of conscience would be a big step in that direction? What does that tell us about the UK's wider foreign policy goals? If the Government want to promote a global Britain and show that Britain is still relevant on the world stage, surely securing the release of a young mother and an older grandfather who are its own citizens would be a pretty good place to start.

I echo the comments made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about the role of our influence with regional allies and by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) about trade deals. We need more than warm words from the Minister.

I hope that when he responds to the debate we will hear about some concrete action that will ultimately help to free Nazanin and Kamal and reunite them with their families.

5.11 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who has secured this timely debate and has never given up on behalf of her constituents—especially Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is serving that terrible and immoral sentence in the dreadful Evin jail in Tehran. She gave us a comprehensive account of how her constituent happened to be convicted and of her appalling treatment by the Iranian authorities. She was passionate, as always, and she has fought hard for her constituent, who has been denied justice for the past 14 months in detention in Iran.

We have also heard contributions from the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he was passionate as always—and for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), and from my new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who pointed out that he had received 100 emails from constituents and that the situation really was Kafkaesque. He is absolutely right. I hope the Foreign and Commonwealth Office takes his advice and presses the Iranian Government at least to allow the medical care and attention needed.

We know that Iran does not recognise dual nationality—we have heard that many times this afternoon. It will not allow our diplomats to see dual nationals who are imprisoned in Iran. The Iranian Government view dual nationals with intense suspicion. That is an historical situation, and the United Kingdom is viewed with even more contempt owing to its historical interference in the country. The BBC's Persian service is loathed by Iranian officials. As we know, dual nationals are barred from holding Government positions. The imprisonment of dual nationals has been seen by many as a way of extracting political and financial gains from the countries that dual nationals share their citizenship with.

The *Financial Times* says:

"These arrests are part of the tense power struggle between those who would like to get closer to the US and those who are scared of any impacts of that on Iran's domestic politics...The goal seems to be spreading fears to undermine the government of Rouhani in western states' eyes and foreign businesses."

We know that the Government restored full diplomatic relations with Iran in September 2016, but Kamal Foroughi's son, Kamran, has criticised the United Kingdom for doing so without pushing harder for his father's release as part of the diplomatic normalisation process. I wonder whether the Minister will comment on that.

In April 2017, Amnesty International criticised the Foreign Secretary for his lack of action over Nazanin. Kathy Voss of Amnesty International was quoted in *The Daily Telegraph* as saying:

"It's baffling that the Foreign Secretary still hasn't had a single meeting with Nazanin's family who are of course sick with worry about her."

Nazanin was arrested, as we have heard, by the revolutionary guards at the airport on 3 April 2016, just before she was about to return to the United Kingdom after a family visit. They accused her of fomenting a soft overthrow of the Islamic Republic—a notably common

[Fabian Hamilton]

and broad definition of crime—but her husband, Richard Ratcliffe, claims that his wife is being held to be used as a pawn by the Iranian authorities in exchange for unspecified political and financial deals in the UK. He has mentioned in the past that he has been approached by unspecified Iranian officials with offers for Nazanin's release. That is shocking, and I wonder if the Minister could comment on it.

The United Kingdom Government, as we have heard, have not publicly called for Nazanin's release. However, they have stated that they have raised their concerns with the Iranian Government. The shadow Foreign Secretary said on 9 September 2016:

"It is no longer good enough for Downing Street and the Foreign Office to 'raise concerns' about this case. It is time for them to demand answers."

Let me conclude with the words of Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband, quoted on 2 July:

"I don't think the [UK] government has been protecting us; they have provided consular assistance and they have expressed concerns...but in terms of criticising her treatment and saying it's abuse, they've never said that this does not meet the minimum legal standards, that it's not a fair trial. That this is a nonsense. She's obviously not important enough yet."

I want to remind Members here that Roya Nobakht and Bahman Daroshafaei are also British dual nationals in jail in Tehran.

5.16 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this debate? I thank all Members who have spoken—principally my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell), for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople, particularly the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), for an appreciation of some of the politics behind this.

I certainly recognise the intense interest in this issue, not only across the parties in this House but among the public in the United Kingdom and beyond. Of course I recognise the deep concern felt about all the cases mentioned today and the huge frustration at the lack of progress. I will try to offer as much clarity as I can and set out what the Government are doing to assist the detainees and their families. I will also explain the limitations on what we can do.

Like everyone else, I wish to see all those mentioned today returned to their families and to the UK. My responsibility and our responsibility is to work in the most effective way we can, in all the circumstances, to achieve that, and to explain what we do and why. I know everyone here would welcome me doing more. I am not sure how much people would welcome me doing something that made life more difficult. That is the dilemma in which we find ourselves.

Let me say what I am trying to do. This issue has been a priority for me since my appointment last month. I spoke to the deputy Foreign Minister of Iran about our prisoners on 21 June and raised the subject again when I met the Iranian ambassador on 6 July. Two days

before that, I met relatives of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and earlier this afternoon I met the family of Mr Foroughi. At both those meetings I assured the families that I would do everything I could for their loved ones. The families also have round-the-clock access to support and assistance from our dedicated Foreign Office officials. I know how much the officials put into this, and I think the families involved know that as well. There is no intention to keep anyone in the dark about anything. There is a limit to how much information we have, but everything that we can communicate is communicated directly to the families. They have 24-hour access to consular officials, and they and all colleagues here have constant access to me.

Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: No, because I want to leave time for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn to speak at the end. I cannot possibly answer all the questions raised. All colleagues who have a question on the table will get an answer by letter, but I want to address as much as possible of what the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn said.

I want to assure all colleagues that we are doing everything we can for our detainees. Our strategy is based on decades of experience—both our own experience and that of international partners—of dealing with Iran. We judge that approach to be in the best interests of those detained, but we keep it under constant review. If our assessment of the right way to handle this is to change, we would consider any alternative courses of action, but for now we judge the approach we are taking to be the most constructive one.

Our ambassador raises the issue of our detainees with the Iranian authorities at every opportunity; he seeks to secure consular access and to ensure their welfare. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have raised all our consular cases with their counterparts and have stressed the importance of resolving them as quickly as possible. My predecessor, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), discussed the issue with the Iranians on numerous occasions, both in London and Tehran. However, we must recognise that there are limitations on what we can do.

I turn now to some of the questions raised by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, starting with dual nationality. Nationality is a key factor. All the British nationals currently detained in Iran also hold Iranian nationality. Questions of nationality are for individual states to decide. Unlike the UK, Iran does not legally recognise dual nationality. It considers our detainees to be Iranian, which has implications for consular assistance, which are set out in the passports of those with dual nationality. Under international law, states are not obliged to grant consular access to dual nationals, which is why our passports state that the British Government are unable to assist dual nationals in the country of their other nationality.

Our travel advice for Iran reiterates that statement and highlights the additional potential risks for British-Iranian dual nationals travelling there. None the less, we try to help dual nationals in exceptional circumstances. In practice, that is often difficult, as we are finding in Iran. We have repeatedly asked the Iranian authorities to grant us consular access to our dual-national detainees.

However, as Iran considers them to be Iranian, it does not recognise our right of access. We know that other countries face similar difficulties, but we will continue to press for consular access.

Let me turn to some other issues. On publicly calling for the release of the detainees, we are doing everything we can for them, including trying to secure access to them and to ensure their welfare. However, we do that in the way that we judge is in their best interests, and we assess that the approach we are currently taking is the most likely to be in the best interests of all our prisoners in Iran.

As has been stated, there are new opportunities with Iran's opening up. Following the destruction of our own embassy there some years ago, a new embassy has opened and new relationships are opening up. It is a complex country with a complex power structure, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East made clear, but I am hoping to take the opportunity—and I am sure the Government are hoping to take it—to explore what this new chance of a relationship with Iran means, both for us and for them. That will take some time, but it provides the opportunity for contacts to be made in a different way from before. That will supplement the efforts already being made on a regular basis to raise the issue by our consular team and by Ministers at the highest level.

Raising the issue can mean a variety of different things, from just mentioning it at a particular time to, following the development of a relationship, an opportunity to go into the issue further. Some of the issues that we consider here are blindingly obvious, such as how a country is seen by others around the world. We understand that very well. Different aspects of the Iranian Government understand some of that, but not others. We want to make sure that they see an issue like this as we see it, so that they can take the steps that we need to see our nationals returned.

Human rights in Iran generally are another key part of the debate, but what do we do about them? The Government take human rights and the rule of law seriously, and the human rights situation in Iran remains dire. I am putting that on the record, so that we in this Chamber, and the Iranian Government and the Iranian ambassador, who will read the account of the debate, will see it and know exactly what we mean. The human rights situation in Iran remains dire, and we are determined to continue to hold the Iranian Government to account. We frequently release statements condemning the human rights situation in Iran and regularly take action with the international community.

For example, we designated more than 80 Iranians responsible for human rights violations under EU sanctions, helped to establish the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran and strongly support the human rights resolutions regarding Iran at the UN. We believe that continued engagement with Iran on economic development and openness are the best ways to develop our relationship and will give us better leverage to discuss other issues. We do not pursue trade to the exclusion of human rights and the rule of law; they can be, and are, complementary.

We considered very carefully the invitation to visit Evin prison earlier this month. The decision to participate in the tour was taken because we felt it would provide an opportunity to engage directly with prison authorities

regarding the dual-national detainees. We felt that taking this opportunity should be taken, in the best interests of all our detainees and their families. Our consul repeatedly asked to see the British-Iranian detainees but was denied access. The risk of not accepting the invitation was the Iranian authorities saying, "We gave you an opportunity to see the conditions. You didn't take it. What do you expect?" There are occasions when we are trapped if we do and trapped if we don't.

Everyone in the FCO who deals with this—the consular team, which has been in constant contact with the families—knows how hard people are being pressed, but the truth is that this is not a matter in the hands of the UK Government to resolve. If it is to be resolved, it has to be resolved by the Iranian regime, and we have to play a part in making sure that we have done everything we can to facilitate that and make it work. There are different approaches to that. There is a public approach, which people can see; it is right that this issue is brought up here and in the most direct way by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn and all hon. Members who represent those who have been detained, and it is right that this is carried worldwide. However, different groups have different responsibilities, and my responsibility is to do what the Foreign Secretary and I consider to be most effective to secure the return of the detainees to their families. As we can see, that means our having a different approach from that which people might like to see.

All I can say is that, so long as I have the conviction that everything we are doing is as appropriate as it can be and is best designed to get the result we all seek, I will continue to do it. If the Government need to change course, we will, but I will not put an artificial barrier in the way of our progress by doing something that I might subsequently regret. I assure colleagues that we are doing everything we can to seek the result that we all want, but we are doing it in the way that we consider—with our experience of Iran and the experience of those who have worked with Iran for a long time—to be the best way possible. That does not in any way deny the efforts of others to do things in their way and to make sure that the Iranian authorities know how we feel, how the public feel and how the world feels.

We must do the work that we can to ensure the best interests of those who have been detained. That is why we are doing what we are doing, and I pledge to colleagues that I will continue to do what I consider to be in the best interests of those detainees, but I will constantly listen to those with other ideas and to the families, so that we do as much for them as we possibly can.

5.27 pm

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the Minister for his constructive response; I must say, he is much more constructive than his predecessor. I welcome his saying that he will look after the interests of the prisoners who have been mentioned in the debate. However, there are a few questions I would still like to hear him answer; perhaps he can write to me. I understand that he did not have time to respond to all of the questions I posed.

We would like a full report on the visit of the 45 diplomats who went to the prison. What kind of resistance was faced when they actually asked to see Nazanin—I am glad they asked to see her—and what response did we

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

give to that? It seems alarming that they would allow the consul on a tour of a prison but now allow them to see the dual-nationality prisoners. The shadow Foreign Secretary and I sent a letter to the Foreign Secretary requesting that he meet the families of the prisoners and he did not respond. Can the Minister convince him to meet them? I would like to be present at that meeting.

Will the Minister write to let me know whether our Government will publicly say that Nazanin is innocent and that we demand her release—and the release of Kamal Foroughi and Roya Nobakht? We would like to know whether the Government believe in their innocence and that they should be released and returned. I understand that there are diplomatic ways in which to apply pressure, but to say that they are innocent and to ask for their release would send a strong signal to the Iranian authorities.

I only have a minute left, so let me take this opportunity to thank all Members who have contributed, particularly

the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), because he has worked very constructively with me. We all have the same interests at heart: we want to bring our prisoners back to this country, to protect them and to reunite them with their families.

I will put forward a ten-minute rule Bill that will look at how we can offer better protection to dual nationals, because it is not good enough to keep talking about existing laws. Times have changed and more people with dual nationality live in this country than ever, and there has to be some means of protecting and looking after them when they go on holiday. They are British citizens, they are proud to be British and are part of the country we live in, so I would appreciate cross-party support for that Bill to see if we can change some of the legislation.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 July 2017

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Queen's Speech: Implications for Wales

9.30 am

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Wales and the Queen's Speech. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I am delighted to see so many Welsh Labour colleagues on the Opposition Benches; what a shame that there are no Conservative colleagues here to speak from the Government Benches. In the Gracious Speech on 21 June, the Queen said:

"A priority will be to build a more united country, strengthening the social, economic and cultural bonds between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. My government will work in cooperation with the devolved administrations, and it will work with all of the parties in Northern Ireland to support the return of devolved government."

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does she agree that the Conservatives' giving money to Northern Ireland outside the Barnett formula and not giving the other UK nations their fair share is hardly likely to strengthen the Union?

Jo Stevens: I absolutely agree; it is nothing more than a bung to the Democratic Unionist party to hold up a minority Government. In her briefing on the Queen's Speech, the Prime Minister said that

"this Government will do everything in our power to build a more united nation and strengthen our precious union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We will take seriously our responsibility to govern for the whole United Kingdom and will seek to work closely with the devolved administrations."

The Prime Minister and her Government have not got off to a very good start, as my hon. Friend referred to. The DUP bung—a minimum of £1 billion in exchange for 10 votes to prop up the Government—hardly builds a more united nation and certainly does not demonstrate a will to work with all parties in Northern Ireland.

Hywel Williams (Afon) (PC): Does the hon. Lady think that the deal actually busts the Barnett formula?

Jo Stevens: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point. I know that there has been commentary from the Welsh First Minister about whether it needs to be reviewed. Perhaps the Minister will deal with that in his response.

The paucity of the Government's programme for this two-year parliamentary Session was laid bare in the Queen's Speech. Much of the Conservative party manifesto was abandoned: dementia tax; means testing the winter fuel allowance; grammar schools in England—of course, we do not have them in Wales—a vote on repealing the fox hunting ban, although I suspect that Plaid Cymru Members would have been glad at that policy; fixed-term

Parliaments; the energy price cap; and the removal of free school lunches. The U-turns and concessions have continued apace since then.

What exactly was on offer for Wales in that Speech and since from the Government? After the dog's dinner of the Wales Act 2017 in the last Parliament, there has been no progress on tidying up and providing much-needed clarity on the devolution settlement, nothing to offer on rail electrification or anything concrete on scrapping the Severn bridge tolls and no Swansea bay tidal lagoon announcement, despite the Government sitting on the favourable Hendry report since January.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned rail electrification in north Wales. Although I welcome the announcement of an HS2 hub in Crewe, does she agree that that was an ideal opportunity to announce at least a plan for the future of connectivity from Crewe to north Wales? Electrification could be a part of that.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which I think demonstrates the Government's lack of vision for Wales; they are always concentrating on what they can do for England, rather than Wales.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend also mentioned the Severn bridge tolls. The Conservative party had a very late conversion to scrapping the tolls during the election campaign, yet there was nothing about it in the Queen's Speech. Does she agree that businesses and commuters in south Wales need clarity about what will happen next?

Jo Stevens: I absolutely agree. We need clarity on that now, just as we need clarity on so many other things that the Government are dealing with—or not dealing with—at the moment.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that another big gap in the Tory agenda is the issue of low pay in our valleys? Should they not really have brought in a real living wage of £10 an hour, which would make a big difference for our communities?

Jo Stevens: Absolutely. Our party's manifesto promised a £10 minimum wage by 2020—a proper living wage, as opposed to the fake living wage introduced by the Government.

There was no confirmation in the Queen's Speech of any investment to expand our capital city rail station at Cardiff Central and no confirmation that the Wylfa Newydd project will be delivered to ensure a sustainable economic legacy for Anglesey and the wider north Wales region. There was no devolution of air passenger duty and no transitional help for the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women of Wales, whose campaign here and in Wales has been led with such distinction by Welsh Labour MPs, including my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). There was also no announcement on scrapping child burial fees, which was another campaign led so passionately in the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East.

[Jo Stevens]

The Government have even cut the number of Ministers in the Wales Office, which is a clear illustration of their lack of interest in Wales.

All we have been offered from the Queen's Speech is an arrogant, hard and damaging Brexit and a repeal Bill—after reading it last week, I see why the word “great” has been dropped. It is a dangerous Bill that offers two power grabs by the Executive for the price of one: from Parliament and from the devolved Administrations. That continues the Conservative party’s strategy of many years of minimising scrutiny, challenge and oversight. This week we had the deliberate sabotage of our Select Committees and even the disgrace of the public being locked out of presenting online petitions to Parliament until at least September—an undemocratic and desperate act by a desperate Government.

We have all lived and breathed Brexit for the past 15 months, and today I will focus some of my remarks on what influence women, and Welsh women in particular, have had and will have on the path to Brexit. I do not know about other hon. Members here, but I thought that the EU referendum campaign was the worst I have ever been involved in, for a number of reasons. It was not just the nastiness and vitriol spewed out by some—I emphasise “some”—campaigners, using the excuse that it was a discussion about immigration. It was not just because my friend and our colleague Jo Cox was assassinated by a right-wing fascist the week before the referendum. It was not just the insurmountable task of trying to undo 40 years of negative press and stories about the EU and what membership meant, and it was not just because we had to listen to and watch the then leader of UKIP spout bile every single day of the campaign.

I felt alienated by that campaign because the voices I heard time after time were men’s; I rarely heard women’s voices, despite our best efforts to be heard. I wrote a piece in our national newspaper in Wales before the referendum urging women to get involved, to get their voices heard and to talk about the issues that concerned all of us. I particularly wanted young women’s voices to be heard. A University of Loughborough analysis of the referendum campaign showed that men received an astonishing 91% of EU referendum coverage in newspapers and 84% of the coverage in broadcast media.

The voting patterns by gender in the referendum were also interesting. In all age categories up to age 64, women voted to remain in higher percentages than men. In the 18-24 age group, 80% of women voters voted to remain, compared with 61% of men. The majority of women were not heard during the campaign and the majority did not get the result they wanted in the referendum either. However, it was a woman, Gina Miller, who took on the Government after the result. She suffered horrendous abuse and character assassination in the process, but it was her determination and bravery in the face of all of that that led to the Prime Minister being dragged back to Parliament to obtain specific permission to trigger article 50.

What about the withdrawal negotiations, now that they have started? I know the Minister will say this, so I will pre-empt him by saying that I know we have a female Prime Minister. However, her ministerial negotiating

team is entirely male: the Brexit Secretary and the Secretaries of State for International Trade and for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Their teams at the Departments for Exiting the European Union and for International Trade, and the Foreign Office are also all entirely male—there is not a single female Minister from the House of Commons in those teams. That negotiating team is working on behalf of 65 million people, more than half of whom are women.

We have a lot to lose through Brexit. Wales is a net beneficiary of EU membership and has been in receipt of EU structural funds for a number of years. The availability of the European social fund has supported a range of programmes in Wales that have focused on not only tackling the causes of poverty, but investing in skills and young people. Many of those programmes have focused on addressing the barriers that continue to hold women back and contribute to ongoing economic inequality. Chwarae Teg’s Agile Nation 2 project is one of them. Others include Agile Nation 1, funded as part of the previous round of structural funds, and the Welsh Government’s Parents, Childcare and Employment programme—PaCE—which provides targeted support to help women gain employment.

On its own, the Agile Nation 2 project is worth £12 million and is funded by the European social fund and the Welsh Government. The project works with women and with small and medium-sized enterprises in priority sectors in Wales to address the causes of the gender pay gap. Those projects not only deliver services that support women; many also provide employment for women. The third sector workforce in Wales is predominantly female, and 66% of the public sector workforce in Wales is female.

European funding has been used to deliver projects directly focused on equalities and, probably more importantly, cross-cutting themes of equality and tackling poverty. So far there has been no guarantee from the Government that funds repatriated to the UK will be made available to Wales to continue work similar to that which has been possible through funding streams such as the European social fund.

Membership of the EU has had a very positive impact on equalities legislation in both the UK and Wales. It is vital that we receive guarantees that the rights and protections from EU-derived equalities legislation in the UK will be maintained post Brexit. The current EU framework of legislation has acted as an absolute equality protection here in the UK. For example, it has prevented the scrapping of parts of the Equality Act 2010 as part of the Government’s one-in, two-out deregulation red tape challenge.

Membership of the EU has ensured not only that legislation is passed that explicitly deals with the causes of inequality, but that the impact of all Government policies on equality is considered, in relation to preventing discrimination and advancing equality. We have kept equality impact assessments in Wales, but the UK Government have scrapped them. As a result, the cumulative impact on women of seven years of austerity policies, such as welfare reform and tax changes, under the coalition Government, the previous Conservative Government and the current Conservative Government has not been accurately assessed by Government Departments, and policy is not being developed with a focus on equality. It has been the Labour party and

groups such as the Women's Budget Group that have illustrated the damaging effect of the past seven years on women in Wales and the UK.

Brexit will lead to a further lack of focus on preventing discrimination and advancing equality, and the full impact of Government decisions on women will continue to be ignored by this Government. The Women and Equalities Committee report, "Ensuring strong equalities legislation after the EU exit", published in the previous Parliament, made a number of good recommendations. I hope that the Minister has read them and might discuss them with his colleagues. They included bringing forward an amendment to the Equality Act 2010 "to empower Parliament and the courts to declare whether legislation is compatible with UK principles of equality", including a clause in the repeal Bill that "explicitly commits to maintaining the current levels of equality protection when EU law is transposed into UK law" and developing a cross-Government equality strategy.

I am really concerned about access to equalities data and research and European networks post Brexit. Similar concerns were raised by those who submitted evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee for its inquiry. Wales and the UK must have access to European civil society and equalities networks, and funds must be ring-fenced to allow current equalities research to continue undisrupted. That evidence base is crucial to shaping domestic policy and demonstrating the UK's progress in meeting international obligations such as the sustainable development goals.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend concerned that the Government are now proposing in the repeal Bill to give themselves so-called Henry VIII powers to modify a whole raft of legislation as seems appropriate, which could have an impact on legislation relating to women?

Jo Stevens: That is absolutely right. Those Henry VIII powers are part of the strategy I mentioned earlier of avoiding scrutiny, challenge and debate.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the WASPI women. Did we not see here in Westminster Hall recently the Government's contempt for Parliament when the motion on that debate was rejected by Members, and instead of there being a deferred Division on the WASPI issue, the Government have completely ignored it and not brought it to the Floor of the House? That shows they cannot be trusted with the Henry VIII powers they are bringing in via the Queen's Speech.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and makes an important point. I do not think there is any trust in what the Government are trying to do with the repeal Bill.

As negotiations progress, it is crucial that thought is given to the financial impact that Brexit will have on women in Wales and the steps that should be taken to ensure that strong equalities legislation is maintained. Leaving the EU must not mean throwing away the decades of positive work that has been achieved in relation to equalities by the trade union and labour movement and progressive labour lawyers. Equality must be at the forefront of the agenda. This is why I, along with

the Mother of the House, have written to the Prime Minister to express our concern about the lack of women involved in the Brexit negotiations. Where is our voice? I cannot see where it will come from.

The Prime Minister has said:

"As we leave the European Union...we will make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us."

I am afraid I simply do not have faith in those negotiating with our EU partners. I am going slightly off-piste here, but does anyone remember the opening lines of the song from the "Pinocchio" Disney film?

"When you get in trouble and you don't know right from wrong, give a little whistle."

After the £350 million a week to the NHS promise on that bus, the Foreign Secretary's latest insult to the EU 27 just reinforced his Pinocchio credentials. I make a joke of it, but when the task ahead is almost too large to comprehend, we need to have confidence in those negotiating on our behalf, and I do not.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend think that one of the rare shafts of light that occurred during the general election campaign from the Prime Minister was her refusal to guarantee the people of Wales that they would not suffer by losing out financially as a result of the Budget negotiations? Will my hon. Friend ask the Minister to give an assurance that there will be no reduction in the settlement for Wales as a result of the Budget negotiations and the conclusion of the deal?

Jo Stevens: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. The Minister heard the question, and we look forward to hearing his answer.

There are more than 40 years of laws made in the context of European Union membership. The former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Judge, has described Brexit as unleashing a "legislative tsunami", and he thinks it will be the greatest challenge in history to the integrity of Parliament's procedures. The repeal Bill published last week does nothing to reassure us that the integrity of Parliament's procedures will be sustained, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) gave the example of what happened in the WASPI debate.

The Bill does nothing to reassure me and women across Wales that the Government will protect and maintain our hard-fought-for rights when we exit the EU. When I hear the Brexit Secretary say, for example, that all current workers' rights under existing law will be protected, I am not convinced at all. It is not a promise, and it is certainly not a guarantee. We know what the Government are up to with the inclusion of those dangerous Henry VIII powers in the Bill. As we all know, Henry VIII's powers never did much good for women—I'm here all week.

Wales is far more dependent than the United Kingdom as a whole on trade with the European Union. We know that 67% of Welsh exports went to the EU in the last quarter of last year. More than 190,000 jobs in Wales are connected to demand from the single market, yet the Wales Office has declined to publish any formal analysis of the effects that different forms of trade partnership with the European Union would have on the Welsh economy.

[*Jo Stevens*]

On higher education, we have more than 5,500 students from the EU enrolled in Welsh universities. Analysis from 2011-12 shows that EU students generated nearly £133 million for the economy and more than 1,200 jobs. Cardiff University in my constituency has gained from live framework programme 7 and Horizon 2020 projects awarded up to the end 2016, amounting to more than £24 million, with further applications to Horizon 2020 in the pipeline to the value of another £20 million. For Cardiff University alone, European structural fund projects are worth an additional £39 million, with a further £22.5 million of projects in development. One significant recipient of the funding is CUBRIC—Cardiff University brain research imaging centre. That is set to become one of Europe's leading facilities for brain imaging, but it was able to exist only because of more than £4.5 million of EU funds.

Cardiff University is collaborating with other EU universities on more than 50 research projects, and 16% of Welsh university research funding comes from the EU; that is far more than the 10% from private sources. More than 4,500 students and nearly 1,000 staff from Welsh universities have studied in other countries under the Erasmus scheme. Where is the guarantee from the Government that the EU funding streams will be replaced in full after 2020? Please will the Minister address that when he responds to the debate?

However, the most pressing issue, which has left at least 3 million EU citizens in Britain and more than 1 million UK citizens in the EU in complete uncertainty, is their immigration status. EU citizens moving to the UK at the moment do not know under what immigration rules they will have to apply to live here. The Home Office website currently states:

“The cut-off date will be agreed during the negotiations but we are clear that it shouldn't be earlier than 29 March 2017...or later than the date the UK leaves the EU.”

That raises the possibility of the Government telling EU citizens who arrived in Wales after 29 March 2017 that they will have to apply under a completely different set of immigration rules, despite that deadline not existing when they arrived here. Not only have the Government failed to guarantee the rights of EU citizens, but the repeal Bill is absolutely clear that the Government will have the power to modify, limit or remove the rights that UK law gives to EU citizens. That can be found on page 10 of the explanatory notes to the Bill if anyone wants to look at it.

There are 73,000 EU nationals living in Wales. Welsh public services are acutely reliant on non-UK citizens to take on public sector roles, and about one third of non-UK citizens living in Wales work in the public sector.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of my hon. Friend's speech. She is touching on a very interesting point. During the general election campaign, I met a flower seller in Mountain Ash market who is Italian and lives in Cardiff. He said he was very upset, and when I asked why, he said, “Because ever since Brexit has been talked about, people keep coming to me and saying, ‘You'll be going back home now, won't you?’” He has lived in Cardiff for 15 years and is extremely upset. There are many people in that situation, as I am sure my hon. Friend will agree.

Jo Stevens: I agree entirely: we will all have examples of families and individuals in our constituencies who feel exactly the same way. This is a complete mess. People want to know what will happen to them. It is having a terrible effect on their lives, their family life and their work.

I will give an example. Just last week, a couple came to see me who are living and working in the United Arab Emirates. He is a UK citizen; he is from Cardiff Central and has a home there. He has worked abroad for 20 years, in Greece and now in the UAE. His wife is a Greek national, and their child was born in Greece but has a UK passport. His wife has never lived in the UK and neither has the child. They want to come back to Wales in order for their child to sit his A-levels, and they wanted to know whether they should come back to Cardiff before March 2019 and, if so, whether they would all be able to stay and work in the UK, or, if they left it until after March 2019, whether the mother, with a Greek passport, would be allowed to live and work in the UK. I cannot advise them on what to do. I have absolutely no idea whether they will be able to do that or when they will be able to do it, and I do not even know when I might be able to tell them. I do not think the Prime Minister knows either. Why are the Government treating people in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England in that way?

I have mentioned before in the House my constituent Bashir Naderi, who came to the UK more than 10 years ago as an unaccompanied child refugee. Now aged 20, he has been living in Cardiff and made his home there. Last year, the Home Office attempted to remove him forcibly back to Afghanistan. Before fleeing Afghanistan as a child, he had seen his father murdered by the Taliban; that happened in front of him. He does not know whether any of his remaining family are still alive. In Cardiff, though, he has a girlfriend, Nicole, and a Welsh family who love him. He has been to school in Cardiff and then to college. He has worked hard to complete his training and is now ready, as an adult, to play his part in the economy and the workplace. That is what Wales needs—people who have worked hard and developed skills to play a part in our communities.

We handed in to the Home Secretary a petition with nearly 15,000 signatures. I organised it, along with Bashir's family and supporters, and it was presented to the Home Secretary in January. I have raised in the House Bashir's case and the wider policy issues about child refugees, and I have written to the Home Secretary about it. However, I have not even had an acknowledgement of my letters, never mind the petition, and when I will get a substantive answer, I do not know.

The Government's current policy on child refugees such as Bashir—forcing them to reapply for asylum when they turn 18—is not only callous, but an ineffective use of Home Office time when the Government could be supporting people who need it. I have large numbers of constituents, as I am sure many hon. Members have, who are appealing Home Office decisions to reject asylum claims.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am sure that the hon. Lady is about to relate her remarks back to Wales and the Queen's Speech. I can see the direction of travel, but perhaps she will want to get there a bit sooner.

Jo Stevens: Thank you, Mr Howarth; I will do that. I gave that example because many of these constituents have skills that they want to contribute to the Welsh economy, but they are not allowed to do so because they cannot work while their asylum status is unconfirmed. That is UK Government policy that applies to Wales and is affecting the ability of people to contribute to the Welsh economy.

The current target time for asylum appeals to receive a court date is 48 weeks. That is 48 weeks when people are in limbo. It is partly because of civil service cuts, but also because of cuts to the tribunals service, which have left Wales with inadequate services, too few people to process cases and insufficient judges to hear them. Without action from the Government to improve case processing and decision making, and increasing capacity in our courts system in Wales, the problem will only get worse, but there was nothing in the Queen's Speech to address it.

Those examples show the negative impact of the Government's approach to Wales and our people, and the general election results confirmed that Welsh voters agree. We saw the loss of three Conservative seats, resources poured into target constituencies that the Conservatives failed to win, and the majorities of their re-elected MPs slashed across Wales. We should not be surprised by that. People in Wales know that the Conservative party does not care about Wales. What exactly is the point of Tory MPs in Wales? They have stood by and let the Prime Minister dole out an enormous bung to the DUP and have done nothing and got nothing for Wales. Wales knows that Welsh Labour MPs, Labour councillors, Labour Assembly Members and the Welsh Labour Government continue to stand up for the people of Wales and to fight for an equal and progressive nation. That is why the Conservative party has never been, and never will be, elected to form a Government in Wales.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I would point out that we have just 33 minutes before the winding-up speeches and seven hon. Members hope to be called. I will at this point give informal guidance. If everyone sticks to a five-minute time limit voluntarily, we might just get everyone in. Even then it will be a bit of a push, but I am leaving that as informal guidance at this point. I call Madeleine Moon.

9.58 am

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Howarth; I will speak fast. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) for an amazing speech and for arranging for the debate to take place. The focus on the rights of women in relation to Brexit was spot on and something that no one else has raised so far. I am so pleased that she has done so.

One highlight of the Queen's Speech was the customs Bill. I want to focus on that and the impact in Bridgend and in particular on Ford's automotive engine plant. Like many other automotive companies in the UK, Ford relies heavily on tariff and customs-free trade. Automotive experts, including the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, have made it crystal clear that customs barriers and tariffs will cripple the industry. It is no secret that the single market and customs union have been critical to the sector's competitiveness. That is critical; we cannot allow that to change. The most

recent figures show how significant the industry is to the UK economy. Its turnover was £71 billion and it supports 800,000 jobs. The EU is the largest market for the UK's automotive sector, with 56% of exported cars going into it.

The Government should heed calls from the sector and ensure that the benefits of the single market and tariff and customs-free trade with the EU is retained. That is essential. Keeping free trade and the supply chain unaffected is imperative, otherwise costs will increase. It is estimated that the effect on the automotive industry of losing free access to the customs union will be catastrophic. This is a highly integrated global industry, with vehicles and parts crossing borders multiple times in the assembly process. It relies on the just-in-time manufacturing process, so we need to maintain a seamless customs arrangement. Without that just-in-time process, we will have companies' cash tied up in making sure that parts are available and stockpiled rather than arriving just in time. That will have a devastating impact on the viability of the automotive trade in the UK.

Leaving the EU without a deal would mean reverting to World Trade Organisation tariffs and customs checks at UK borders, which would increase delays, significantly increase costs and impact competitiveness. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders found that a 10% tariff on finished vehicles because of World Trade Organisation rules would cost the industry a staggering £4.5 billion, which would inevitably increase costs for consumers—the average cost of a car in the UK is expected to rise by £1,500 as a result. Research from the PA Consulting Group has found that the cost of moving to a World Trade Organisation regime would impose a 4.5% tariff on vehicle components alone, including the parts needed for the engines being built in Bridgend. That would impact the competitiveness of companies such as Ford in Bridgend, and then there is the knock-on effect of 14,000 jobs associated with that factory in Bridgend—14,000 jobs that I am determined to protect.

I cannot stress enough how important tariff and customs free trade is. Investment in the UK car industry has already sharply declined in the first half of this year to just £322 million, compared with the total of £1.66 billion that was invested in the UK's automotive sector last year. Companies are delaying spending because it is difficult to plan amid uncertainty over our future trading arrangements and concerns relating to the World Trade Organisation tariffs. The Government should carry out an impact assessment on how changes to customs procedures will affect the automotive industry, and absolutely avoid the possibility of resorting to World Trade Organisation rules.

The industry needs concrete reassurances and further details on how the customs Bill will ensure frictionless trade. Nothing is being told to the companies, everyone is living with uncertainty and employees are deeply concerned about their future, their ability to invest in mortgages and the uncertainty of their job prospects. Are they actually going to be in work in two years' time? Nobody knows. Without doubt, the imposition of tariffs by losing access to the single market and customs union puts our businesses across Wales, such as Ford, at a significant disadvantage.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the Government's industrial strategy. It talks about the whole of the UK, but in the automotive

[*Albert Owen*]

sector they have done a sweetheart deal with Nissan, putting greater uncertainties on the other car plants in the United Kingdom. If we are going to have an industrial strategy for all, there must be a level playing field.

Mrs Moon: This Government do not like level playing fields. They do bungs to the DUP, and goodness knows what bung has gone into the north-east—I don't know, nobody knows. We have to have transparency, and we do not have transparency.

A completed car being exported into the EU would face a tariff of 10%, with 4.8% on assembled engines and 2% on components. Currently, banking passporting of capital across the EU is allowed. Is the Wales Office monitoring the number of Welsh businesses applying for banking licences in the EU? SMEs will need time to cope with dealing with the customs transition. Are SMEs going to have support, training and opportunities to ensure awareness of the impact of exiting the customs union on their businesses? There is a great deal of concern that that is not there. Finally, will the Minister comment on REACH rules, on the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals, which are used widely in the automotive industry, and say what he is doing to look at the impact on the automotive industry in Wales?

10.5 am

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this debate and on her very fine speech.

This is a pivotal period in our history. It is a point that will determine the future of our economy, our governance and our relations with the rest of the world—that is, the world beyond just England—but I regret to say that the Prime Minister's legislative programme is a deficient plan for defining times. The UK Government have no majority of their own, a compromised mandate and, as far as I can see, no real plan for Wales. They do have a split Cabinet, a lame duck premier and a legislative programme dominated by what one senior EU diplomat described to me recently as a vanity project for a few politicians who have now largely jumped ship—all that based on an unassailable sense of entitlement and an optimism that all will be well and the world will beat a path to our door.

My contribution today will be focused on two of the most wretched elements of the Queen's Speech: the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the Government's wilful neglect of Wales's infrastructure. It is now quite clear that Westminster intends to claw back powers from the people of Wales. The UK Government intend to encroach on our basic power to govern ourselves, trashing the settlement that, since 1999, has allegedly been based on an agenda of respect. Plaid Cymru MPs will do all that we can to oppose the Bill. We have always said that we will never vote for legislation that takes power away from the people of Wales. Now that the Brexit Secretary has conceded that his withdrawal Bill will need the consent of the devolved Governments, the way that he achieves his purpose will be revelatory, if not miraculous. I look forward to how he will explain himself, but there we are—we live in very strange times.

One way to avoid the provisions of the withdrawal Bill that would most damage Wales would be to make it largely unnecessary by maintaining our economic links with our soon-to-be-former partners. Staying in the single market and the customs union would render much of the Bill nugatory. Yet, as I said, there is no majority, no mandate, no plan, a split Cabinet, a lame duck premier and a legislative programme dominated by a vanity project. As the Prime Minister might say, "Remind you of anyone?" Well, actually, it does; but it is more John Major than Margaret Thatcher.

Turning to infrastructure commitments, where is the concrete commitment—literally concrete—to deliver for Wales? There is a further commitment to HS2, and Welsh taxpayers will be contributing to building the most expensive railway in the world without an inch of it being in Wales. Whatever benefits might come to north and north-east Wales, and perhaps even my constituency, objective commentators have said that it will actually damage the economy of much of the south of our country. I do not think that has been given the attention that it should have been.

The most glaring omission is the electrification of the south Wales main line. I understand that we are to have a further Government U-turn—possibly today, or perhaps it has already been announced—just before we leave for our constituencies. The Prime Minister said the other night that she hoped we would leave Westminster to settle down. Well, we are here not to settle down but to settle up. The Labour Government promised us full electrification in 2009—I took their word for it then, and I am sure their intentions were sincere—and full electrification was promised again in 2010. It is enough of a scandal that eight years later we are still waiting for it, but for the British Government to scuttle electrification of the line to Swansea while expecting the people of Wales to stump up for England's HS2 is breathtakingly arrogant and totally indefensible. I should be glad to hear the Minister's attempt to defend it.

The UK Government are backtracking on the electrification of the south Wales main line. As for the equivalent electrification of the north Wales main line, I suppose we can join the long line of honest people queuing up to whistle for their money from this dodgy Government.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Hywel Williams: I think not, because time is rather short.

The Queen's Speech claws away at our ability to strengthen our country, and it indulges the country's constitutional obsessives and imperial Walter Mittys at the same time. Plaid Cymru will oppose this destructive and offensive stupidity.

10.10 am

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing the debate. We had to wait longer than we expected for the Queen's Speech, apparently because the ink took longer than expected to dry on the vellum. When it came, it made no mention whatever of the tidal lagoon. It did include five interesting objectives: working

with the devolved Administrations to ensure prosperity outside the EU; an industrial strategy that spreads opportunity throughout the UK; backing infrastructure to support economic growth; backing new industries; and acting to reduce energy bills. However, it seems to me that, unless I can be convinced otherwise, the Government have no interest in Wales.

Five years ago, in 2012, the first formal planning document for the Swansea bay tidal lagoon was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. The construction of the tidal lagoon featured in the Conservative party manifesto in 2015, but not in 2017. In January this year, former Energy Minister Charles Hendry published his independent review of tidal lagoons, which concluded that the Swansea bay tidal lagoon would be cost-effective and

“a significant economic opportunity for Wales and the UK more generally.”

Crucially, Hendry stated that moving ahead with a lagoon off the Swansea coast should be seen as “a no-regrets policy” and that it should be built

“as soon as is reasonably practicable.”

The Swansea bay tidal lagoon is set to be the blueprint for tidal energy in the UK. It is a game changer for Wales, but despite the support of the Welsh Government, a number of MPs, AMs, councillors, Wales Office Ministers and Charles Hendry, the UK Government have still not committed to backing the project. We have had enough.

As Cardiff bay, which attracts more than 1 million visitors per annum, has shown, developments that increase the attractiveness and usefulness of Wales’s shoreline can provide a catalyst for further investment and leisure use. There is a strong expectation that the new tidal lagoon would support national events and raise Swansea’s profile. It could build on Swansea’s very strong existing maritime heritage, which includes the National Waterfront Museum and the water sports centre of excellence. As hon. Members will have read in the review, the range of employment opportunities will be far-reaching, not just in design, build and manufacturing, but in related services such as tourism, recreation and recruitment. That will be of huge benefit not just to Gower, Swansea and Wales but to the rest of the United Kingdom. I feel I need to highlight that point, because we are being very short-sighted.

As an educationalist, I feel it pertinent to note how the University of Wales Trinity Saint David is responding by focusing on the skills, needs and opportunities that the tidal lagoon will bring, including the digital skills that are needed to deliver it.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on the tidal lagoon. It is also worth mentioning that 100,000 tonnes of British steel will go into the project. The Prime Minister said that she was disappointed with Donald Trump for withdrawing from the Paris climate accords, yet she refuses to give the go-ahead to this vital, clean, green energy project. How are those two positions compatible?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman may be leading the hon. Lady down a rose-strewn path—unless she can find some way of relating his point to Wales and the Queen’s Speech.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I can tie it back in: the Government missed the opportunity to include our green agenda in their Queen’s Speech.

It is through education and training that we can provide job opportunities for our young people to thrive and prosper in the communities they grew up in. I feel strongly about that, as does a very good friend of mine, an Assembly Member for Llanelli. We do not want the children of Gower to think that they have to get out of Wales to get on. Let them have opportunities locally so that families and future generations can survive in Gower and Wales.

My constituency and the Swansea bay area, which is represented by several hon. Members present, will not see the project’s full benefits unless the Government commit to it. Recent reports have stated that the tidal lagoon is in its most precarious position since its inception; it is in danger of not happening. Funding is available until Christmas, but what will happen then? We need answers. More than £200 million has been provisionally committed, with investors ready to raise hundreds of millions more to fund the project, but David Stevens, the founder of Admiral Insurance, recently said:

“If there’s no evidence that the government is committed then at some point the patience of investors will be exhausted”.

He is right. Swansea tidal lagoon investors have reportedly now decided to delay their investment. We have to have the go-ahead. It is reported that staff have been asked to cut back to a four-day working week. In the words of Mr Stevens, unless the Government act,

“an opportunity will have been lost and it will be very hard to piece together again”.

This is about the future of my constituency. The tidal lagoon would provide a £1.3 billion infrastructure investment in Swansea bay and the surrounding areas. In each year of operation, it would save approximately 236,000 tonnes of carbon, while still fully powering 155,000 Welsh homes.

My constituents and I are very disappointed. I am led to believe that the last Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), was pushing the tidal agenda forward quite forcefully, but the incumbent is stalling. Like my predecessor, he has failed to deliver for Gower and Wales.

Why have the Government not given their support? Are they not interested in green energy, or do they simply not care about Wales? The tidal lagoon project would bring billions to the local and national economy. Wales and the UK would lead the world in exploring green energy alternatives. This project was started five years ago, and now it could be at an end—unless the Government give the tidal lagoon in Swansea the go-ahead immediately.

10.17 am

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing the debate. One thing she said that struck me forcibly was that the Government lost the general election in Wales. I was pleased to see my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) gain their seats from the Conservative party.

Having three new Labour Members of Parliament in Wales is relevant to the Queen’s Speech, because it has put a stop to the Government’s grammar schools policy,

[*David Hanson*]

their proposed legislation on free schools meals and their dementia tax proposals, which caused tremendous upset in my constituency during the election. Positive things have happened because of the general election result, such as last week's announcement of the inquiry into contaminated blood that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) had demanded. [*Interruption.*] The Minister looks quizzical, but he knows that 28 Labour Members and four Plaid Cymru Members were elected in Wales. The Government's majority is non-existent in Wales.

To secure the passage of the Queen's Speech through the House of Commons, the Government have effectively had to bribe the Democratic Unionist party with more than £1 billion. I ask the Minister: if the Government are going to give a significant £1 billion boost to Northern Ireland—including £400 million for infrastructure development, £150 million for the roll-out of ultrafast broadband, an extra £200 million investment in health, and further investment to tackle deprivation and mental health issues—is the Barnett formula now dead, as the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) suggested? I support the Barnett formula; it works well, ensuring that UK Government expenditure is distributed on a par across the regions of the UK. However, if the Government can find £1 billion from the magic money tree that they said did not exist and give that money to Northern Ireland to invest in things that Wales also needs, such as broadband roll-out, strategic transport infrastructure, housing support and investment in health, then they need to come to defend the Queen's Speech today.

As the First Minister of Wales has said, if that £1 billion had been apportioned correctly to Wales, it would have meant an extra £1.6 billion for the economy of Wales. That money would have been used, for example, to help to boost the projects that other hon. Members have mentioned today, including not only the south Wales tidal lagoon but proposals for a tidal lagoon in north Wales. It would also have helped us to build on the announcement made by the Secretary of State for Transport two days ago on High Speed 2 at Crewe, to ensure that we get the benefits of HS2 in north Wales through investment in the line from Crewe to Chester and the electrification of the lines across to north Wales. It would have ensured that we met the commitment that the Chancellor of the Exchequer made in the Budget statement to provide money for a growth deal for north Wales, which I am yet to see; I hope the Minister will give some indication of it in his winding-up speech today. There are a range of things that could have been done in the Queen's Speech, but which the Government failed to do while giving money to Northern Ireland.

I will mention one other thing, because it is happening today. Today in the House of Lords, there is a by-election for a Member of these Houses of Parliament. It is a by-election for an hereditary peer, and among the hereditary peers who are standing is one of my constituents, Lord Mostyn. I had to fight an election six weeks ago to convince thousands of people to vote for me. His electorate today is 31 people—hereditary peers. I hope the Government will bring forward proposals to ban hereditary peers, to stop this nonsense in the House of Commons and the Houses of Parliament. We must abolish hereditary peers and end this system today.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Who created that system?

David Hanson: The Labour Government did in 1999, with the pledge to abolish it at an appropriate moment. Now is the appropriate time—let us do it today.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): We have approximately seven minutes before I have to call the Front-Bench speakers to respond to the debate. I ask the remaining two Back-Bench speakers to divide the time judiciously between them.

10.22 am

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Howarth, for calling me to speak. I will certainly do my best to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) to make a contribution on equal parity.

The Queen's Speech was an opportunity lost. It was a two-year programme that did not have a Welsh dimension, which is an absolute disgrace, particularly when we heard warm words from the Prime Minister, and indeed in the Queen's Speech, that there would be a programme for the whole of the United Kingdom.

I will concentrate on three main points; other Members have touched on them, but I want to elaborate on them and get some answers from the Minister. The first is the north Wales growth deal. We have seen Cardiff and Swansea city deals, which I welcome. In no way do I want to take away from them, but north Wales needs a focus of attention. This growth deal has been announced in numerous autumn statements. It is supposed to be bottom-up from the councils in north Wales, but the reality is that they have been squeezed; they do not have the finances or other resources that are needed. If we are to have an industrial strategy for the whole United Kingdom, we need the United Kingdom Government to take the lead and not pass the buck.

Many of us here in Westminster Hall today received increased mandates from the people of Wales, including the people of north Wales. We want to have a voice when it comes to growth deals, and we want to be able to say that we can help deliver the best for our constituents, so I ask the Minister: what is happening with the north Wales growth deal and why are we as MPs being excluded from its consideration?

I know that the Minister has sympathy with me on the second issue I will raise, which is Welsh ports. That is because Welsh ports will be impacted by Brexit more than any other ports in Europe, because they are the corridor to the Republic of Ireland. If we are to have a “seamless” or “frictionless” border, we want to know what that means; businesses need to know exactly what that means. If we have tariffs in Welsh ports, including Holyhead, then we will have delays and additional costs, which will impact on jobs in north Wales, in Wales as a whole and in the whole United Kingdom. We need clarity on that. I understand the issues with the border in Northern Ireland—I understand the Good Friday agreement and the fragility of that policy. However, the issue of Welsh ports is very important, and thus far it has not been given the attention it deserves.

Finally—I want to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore to make as long a contribution as possible—I will refer to the Hendry review and the Swansea bay

tidal lagoon. The policy has just been kicked into the long grass, with excuse after excuse. I support the policy, and when I was on the Energy and Climate Change Committee we conducted an inquiry into it. We concluded, across parties, that it was a good thing for British energy and British industry. The Hendry review was an independent inquiry, based on a model that this Government had put in—contract for difference strike prices. It is their model, it is their review and it is time they delivered.

I will finish with one last point. The DUP has had £1 billion—in many ways, good on it—but that has taken money and attention away from Wales, which is a disgrace. It is the job of the Wales Office to stand up and be the voice of Wales in Westminster, but it is failing us.

10.26 am

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Howarth; I am grateful for the brief time I have.

I want to make three points. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing the debate. I agree entirely with her, and indeed with the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), about the power grab that the repeal Bill is now conducting against the Welsh Government. I believe that we could be bordering on a real constitutional issue in how devolution moves forward if—at the moment it appears that this will be the case—not all the relevant powers that currently reside with the EU are devolved to the Welsh Government by the UK Government.

There were two things missing from the Queen's Speech that I feel quite passionate about, because they have an impact on Wales and should have been referred to. The first relates to rail electrification. We have had the Transport Secretary on the train to Paddington and we have had the Welsh Secretary driving the train from Paddington to Cardiff, and then saying that we will have additional funding for electrification to Swansea. That would have a significant impact on my constituency and many others across the south Wales belt, and it would have further implications for the electrification of the valleys lines, including the lines through Pencoed up to Maesteg and possibly even to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon)—that would create a transport hub in Bridgend.

That electrification is vital, and the UK Government—the Conservative Government—are failing the people of Wales by not securing it. That is simply unacceptable, especially given the hundreds of promises that Ministers have made time and again to provide electrification. Maybe the Transport Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales just like driving trains—that might explain why they are so keen to make false promises.

The key area I wish to focus on is the impact of pension changes on women born in the 1950s, which was not considered in the Gracious Speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central for plugging the work of our hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and myself on this issue. The issue is specific to Wales—

Albert Owen: And to the rest of the UK.

Chris Elmore: Yes—sorry; it was a comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East, rather than by myself.

There was nothing in the Queen's Speech to aid women born in the 1950s. As a result of the pension reforms introduced by the Conservative Government between 1990 and 1997, and indeed by the coalition Government—we must not forget the role of the Lib Dems in this, because it was their Pensions Minister who made the changes—those women have been severely disadvantaged. I am sure that every Member was made well aware of the issue by their constituents during the general election campaign. These women, who account for about 8% of my constituents, had planned their retirements, from both a financial and a social perspective, only to have the goalposts moved. That is a grave injustice, and this Government continue to ignore it.

Public pressure is mounting. Since the swathe of public opinion was made known at the general election, there has been another spike in support for these women. My understanding is that close to 50 Conservative MPs now publicly support the campaign, in addition to all the opposition MPs across parties. I encourage all Members who are concerned about the issue—I will make a plug here—to attend the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, which is meeting in Committee Room 5 at 3 pm. Perhaps the Minister would like to come along and listen to accounts of the issues these women face.

In conclusion, the Queen's Speech was littered with missed opportunities. The repeal Bill, in its current form, flies in the face of devolution and makes no effort to respect the constitutional arrangements in Wales while arranging our exit from the EU. The continued lack of clarity about the electrification of the Cardiff to Swansea railway line will serve only to aggravate my constituents and local businesses. The silence on the issue of women born in the 1950s shows the continued ignorance about the injustice of the Government's pension changes. The Queen's Speech was a disappointment and serves only to show that this Government are not seriously considering the issues that impact Wales.

10.29 am

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on her very good speech and on securing this debate. We in Scotland share many of the concerns she outlined. She spoke about the lack of vision for Wales in the Queen's Speech and asked what was on offer for Wales from the Government. She then went on to mention a long list of major projects they have failed to announce. There was also no mention of transitional help for the WASPI women. We have had all that while the Government also apparently cut the number of Ministers in the Welsh Office. It hardly suggests a Government greatly interested in listening to Welsh concerns.

The hon. Lady went on to highlight the dangers for Wales of the repeal Bill, which features power grabs from the devolved Administrations, as the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales made clear in their joint statement condemning it. She deplored the nastiness and vitriol of the EU referendum campaign, and I very much share

[*Deidre Brock*]

those concerns. She rightly deplored the awful attack on Jo Cox and highlighted the drowning out of women's voices in the campaign, quoting figures and giving examples that I continue to find shocking, and I look forward to the Minister explaining those.

The biggest part of her speech was on Brexit and the mess we should expect from the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. I, too, think the situation is unsustainable. There is still no proper formal input from the Welsh and Scottish Governments on an issue that we all know will cause massive damage to both nations. The Government's obstinacy is matched only by their eagerness to get a deal done with the DUP, as several Members have highlighted. What are the priorities? Does the DUP get a greater say than the Governments of Scotland and Wales? When will there be proper engagement? If I may press the Minister, what happens if either Scotland or Wales, or both, withhold legislative consent for the repeal Bill?

In a Backbench Business debate on 2 March, the hon. Lady laid out the huge damage being done to the higher education sector in Wales by Brexit and how much damage was likely to follow as research funding dried up. To be clear, Scottish MPs have the same concerns for Scottish universities, but does she consider that the damage will be so great and so long-lasting that it will be too much for Wales to bear? She might conclude that she should be doing whatever she can to frustrate the headlong rush of the Government and her party towards a Brexit cliff.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) rightly highlighted the threat to the automotive industry from Brexit, specifically to Ford in her constituency. As was mentioned, Nissan received some assurances from the Prime Minister early on after the Brexit referendum. I do not recall any similar help or assurances being offered to Ford at Bridgend. Forgive me if I have missed that, but I cannot recall a Minister ever having said that action would be taken to help the Ford workers keep their jobs. What investments will the Government consider to help keep Welsh jobs?

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) made a very good speech. He spoke of a deficient plan for defining times and focused on the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, the clawback of powers from Wales and the lack of investment in Welsh infrastructure. His comments about the power grab from the devolved Administrations were rightly scathing. We in Scotland very much share his view. I must also mention the very good contributions from the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). [*Interruption.*] Apologies for that pronunciation; my Gaelic is not too bad, but my Welsh is sadly lacking.

Finally, looking at the list of Bills in the Queen's Speech that affect Wales, I cannot escape the conclusion that those things would be better done in Wales. Does anyone seriously believe that Welsh agriculture is better served by legislation made here rather than in Cardiff? Tackling domestic violence and abuse in Wales—would that be better done here or there? I think the Welsh people are plenty smart enough to do those things and a whole lot more in their own capital city.

10.34 am

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. You are known throughout Parliament as a just and fair man and an excellent Chair.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman does not put it to the test?

Chris Ruane: I withdraw. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this important debate and so eloquently illustrating her points about Brexit by way of graphic examples from her constituency. I pay tribute to her for highlighting a refreshing and original analysis of the gender imbalance in the whole Brexit debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who spoke about Brexit issues and the impact on the car industry in her constituency.

This debate should have been about the Government's vision for Wales and the rest of the UK. It debate should have offered the Government an opportunity to show their deep understanding of the needs, wants and aspirations of the people of Wales. It should have provided us all with an opportunity to discuss and improve the Government's Wales-specific proposals. Regrettably, as contribution after contribution has highlighted, there is no such opportunity, because the Tories have no vision for Wales. The Tories have no programme for Wales. The Tories have no understanding of Wales. We are an afterthought.

The people of Wales saw through the Tory manifesto in the general election. They realised they were being sold a pup—a pig in a poke—and rejected the offer, instead choosing Labour's visionary manifesto. That risible Tory offer stands in stark contrast to Welsh Labour's general election manifesto. From a position of weakness, the Tory Government are now asking for consensus and agreement to get their emasculated manifesto into statute. In the spirit of co-operation, I wish to highlight some of Labour's positive popular policies, which they are welcome to introduce. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and the Government have already flattered Labour by stealing our ideas for an energy price freeze and ending austerity, which is being discussed in the higher echelons of the Tory party. The more they steal Labour's policies, the more they show themselves to be a party bankrupt of ideas, out of touch with ordinary people and lacking in leadership.

However, there are other policy areas where the Government could learn from Labour to create a more prosperous, healthier, fairer country in Wales. Our manifesto had Wales-specific policies. It had a proudly Welsh agenda, with Welsh values of community, equality, efficiency and hope. It shows that a UK Labour Government working with a Welsh Labour Government would not launch a power grab. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) for highlighting that aspect of the EU (Withdrawal) Bill. It is a naked power grab to take powers back to Westminster. The manifesto shows that a UK Labour Government would be committed to investing in Wales, not another five years of austerity, cuts and indifference.

Many families in Wales, and indeed the UK, are financially worse off than they were 10 years ago. On average, a family is £1,400 worse off. Voters are sick to their hind teeth with austerity, which does not work. Low and middle-income earners are taking all the pain, and the high-income earners are making all the gain. Even Tory Ministers now accept Labour's analysis of austerity. Our manifesto promised investment, reward for hard work and, most of all, hope. It made a commitment to work with the Welsh Government to tolls on the Severn bridge—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who highlighted that—and pledged to end years of Tory under-investment in national rail infrastructure. We promised to commit more than £700 million from a national transformation fund to fund electrification of the Great Western main line to Swansea. That was highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

The manifesto contained a commitment to transform transport networks in north Wales, with electrification from north Wales to Crewe, which would link the region with HS2 and create capacity for new, more frequent services into Liverpool, and beyond to the north of England. The manifesto had clear support for the Wylfa Newydd project to ensure a sustainable economic legacy for Anglesey and the wider north Wales community. Those issues have been thoroughly explored by many Members today, especially on the Labour Benches. Also mentioned many times was the impact on our proposals for the tidal lagoon. I commend and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on raising that issue.

I have outlined numerous Labour policies, but which of those bold, much needed commitments have the Government committed to fully fund in their Queen's Speech? The answer is none—not a single one. Perhaps we should not be surprised, because not only do the Government have no vision for Wales; they have no overall mandate for Wales. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) mentioned the Conservatives' target seats and my success and that of other hon. Members in the Chamber today. The Tories proposed a Labour wipeout across Wales. They tried to plant their Tory tanks on Labour lawns in Bridgend, Wrexham, and Newport East. The ConservativeHome website listed the seats they were going to win from Labour Alyn and Deeside, Bridgend, Cardiff South and Penarth, Cardiff West, Clwyd South, Delyn, Newport East, Newport West, Wrexham, Ynys Môn and Torfaen.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I am following the hon. Gentleman closely. I do not remember any of that being in the Queen's Speech in relation to Wales. Perhaps he will return to the matter of the Queen's Speech and Wales.

Chris Ruane: I will return to the Queen's Speech and Wales and probably the grubbiest element, Mr Howarth: the alliance of the Conservative party with the DUP. The Prime Minister was reduced to securing her own position by throwing money from the magic money tree, which was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn—the magic money tree that Conservatives alleged Labour had. Well, I want a branch of that magic money tree in Wales. Does the Minister

want a branch of that tree in Wales? [*Interruption.*] He says he will respond in due course. I hope that will be in the positive and the affirmative.

So there is a magic money tree in Northern Ireland that is worth £1 billion. As has been mentioned before, if it was transferred to Wales, that would mean £1.6 billion that we could invest in the infrastructure of Wales. After years of cuts from central Government, amounting to £1.2 billion a year from the Welsh block grant, our constituencies are suffering because of the lack of infrastructure and investment.

I hope the Minister will address the issue of the magic money tree for Wales when he winds up. We are in the mother of Parliaments. We are one of the best democracies in the world, yet we are reduced to pork-barrel politics for Northern Ireland, which is not a way to run a democracy. We need fair, open and transparent funding across the UK. Our people are crying out for it. The Minister knows his people are crying out for it. That is why his majority was reduced by such a massive amount and why I am here today. I will not have a word said against my benefactor and patron, the Prime Minister, who has allowed me to return to this place.

Chris Elmore: Hear, hear.

Chris Ruane: I thank my hon. Friend for his "Hear, hear."

The debate has been very good. There was not much to debate because there was not much in the Queen's Speech to benefit Wales, but we have picked over what little scraps there were. We have done justice to the people of Wales by analysing the Conservative programmes, or lack of them, proposed in the Queen's Speech.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) on his return to the House and to the Front Bench. I am not sure whether that is a reflection of the fact that nobody else was willing to take the position under the current leader of the Labour party. It certainly seems that the only speech to indicate support for the leader of the Labour party was the final speech, from the shadow Minister, but we might have expected that.

The debate has been interesting. It has drifted away from the Queen's Speech as it affects Wales on numerous occasions. Westminster Hall is a forum where hon. Members have more of an opportunity to make a point that is relevant to their own constituencies or to highlight issues of a partisan nature.

On the issue of my survival, which the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd highlighted, I remember that in 2015 the hon. Gentleman was in my constituency on the Wednesday prior to the election. I can assure him that I was not in his constituency in 2017, because I was looking after my own patch. If a little less hubris had been shown in 2015, perhaps the hon. Gentleman would not have had a two-year break. Now I will take an intervention.

Albert Owen: On the Minister's point about debating the Queen's Speech in Westminster Hall, is it his intention to have a fuller debate in the Welsh Grand Committee, which was set up for Welsh issues only? It would also provide an opportunity for Conservative Welsh Members to attend and to speak up for Wales.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Welsh politics has always held a great fascination for me, although I do not think this debate is the occasion to run either the last general election, or, as the Minister seems to be doing, the one before that. If we can stick to the issue at hand, I am sure the people of Wales will be very grateful to us.

Guto Bebb: I will take your advice on board, Mr Howarth, and will quickly respond to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen). We agreed to a Welsh Grand Committee on the subject of the Queen's Speech, but the people of Wales would think it odd if we had the same debate twice. However, we will of course have a Welsh Grand Committee in due course.

It is important to highlight that the point of the Queen's Speech, to be perfectly frank, was to deal with the issue of Brexit. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central is a passionate advocate of remain. I have nothing but respect for her position, but I question whether her comments were more of a cry for help against the Labour manifesto rather than a complaint about the Queen's Speech.

We are dealing with a decision taken not only by the people of the United Kingdom, but by the people of Wales. The decision was made in Wales, in the constituencies of many Labour Members, that Wales would leave the European Union. A vote was held and I suspect that every person here would describe themselves as a democrat. As such, we are left in a situation whereby the Government have an obligation to legislate for what was decided democratically in a referendum by the people of Wales and the United Kingdom. The Queen's Speech therefore highlights the fact that a significant portion of the Bills in it deal with our leaving the European Union. It is clear from the constructive and not so constructive comments made by Opposition Members that everybody recognises that the process by which we will leave the European Union will be complicated and difficult and will require a degree of co-operation across the Floor of the House. I am certain that that will happen. The intention of the Government is to work with, not against, Opposition parties on these issues.

Before we turn to the content of the Queen's Speech, it is worth reminding hon. Members that there was little difference between the Labour and Conservative manifestos at the general election when it came to leaving the European Union. Although the Government remain united in dealing with our exit from the European Union, in contrast with the Labour party, which has already lost shadow Ministers following disagreements about leaving the European Union. I therefore say to Labour Members that although we have 27 Bills in the Queen's Speech, the vast majority of which have an impact on Wales, it is worth highlighting that the aim of the legislation on leaving the European Union is to provide clarity, continuity and certainty for people, businesses and organisations in Wales that are dealing with leaving the European Union.

Hywel Williams: As the Minister has said, the bulk of the Queen's Speech is about exiting the European Union. Is he confident that the economy, foreign affairs and a whole host of other issues will get the attention they require while we spend our time discussing the minutiae of the regulations on fish fingers or whatever?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is imperative that all of us try to ensure that while we deal with this complex issue in a constructive manner, we also do not take our eye off the day job. I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman's comment.

The European Union (Withdrawal) Bill was introduced in the Queen's Speech. The aim is to provide certainty and continuity to businesses, workers and consumers in Wales and across the UK as we leave the European Union. The aim of the Bill is to fulfil the Government's promise to end the supremacy of EU law in the UK by repealing the European Communities Act 1972, removing the supremacy of EU law and returning control to the UK. That is the only way for the UK to leave the European Union and ensure that our future laws are made in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast.

That is an important point. We have talked about this so-called power grab, and I assure hon. Members that there is no intention whatever of a power grab. The first person to talk of the importance of UK frameworks as we leave the European Union was none other than Carwyn Jones, First Minister of Wales. I agree. We do not want to find ourselves in a situation where we leave the EU single market and damage the UK single market. The whole point of frameworks within any future settlement is to ensure that the UK market and the UK system work on the basis of equality between businesses and individuals across the United Kingdom. Although I am not surprised that the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who represents the Scottish National party, would disagree, it is fair to say that I am surprised that the Labour party, which claims to be a Unionist party, seems to be very annoyed at the prospect of having rules that apply across the United Kingdom agreed across the United Kingdom as part of the withdrawal process.

It is clear that withdrawing from the European Union and repealing the European Communities Act 1972 will leave a large hole in our statute book. We therefore have to ensure that there is no cliff edge on the day that we leave the European Union. Part of the intention of the legislation is to ensure that the body of law is incorporated into UK law, which will be known as EU retained law, to ensure that on the day after departure, businesses, consumers and so forth will be in a situation of certainty, knowing that the rules and regulations that applied on the day before we left the European Union apply the day after we leave. That is an effort to ensure continuity, which will be absolutely crucial.

As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) highlighted in a passionate speech—I agreed with every single word, I must say—the certainty that businesses require in our departure from the European Union means that the regulations currently in place as part of EU law need to be in place as part of our own law, on the basis of continued EU legislation within the UK. We are trying to ensure that the issues raised about Bridgend are dealt with as we leave.

Jo Stevens: If the point really is about providing certainty, why include all the Henry VIII powers in the repeal Bill? That is what is leading to the mistrust. We believe—we are certain—that the Government will try to change EU law as it comes back into UK law.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady is a member of the Labour party, so I understand her suspicion of the intentions of a Conservative-led Government, but the aim of the Henry VIII powers are to correct deficiencies within the law as it stands. There will be thousands of deficiencies where legislation refers to European regulations and European laws. There will be a need to correct them. The same need to correct deficiencies will be granted to the Governments in Cardiff, Edinburgh and, I hope, Belfast. The intention is to correct deficiencies. The last thing the hon. Lady would want to see on the day after we depart the European Union is for our legal system to be inoperable. That would be a dereliction of duty on behalf of this Government.

I hope that gives some degree of comfort to the hon. Lady. Ultimately, there is an obligation on the Opposition to scrutinise as we go through the process of putting that the legislation in place.

Albert Owen: Would the Minister give way on that very point?

Guto Bebb: Not for the time being; I have to make some progress.

Converting EU law into UK law is not enough to ensure a functioning statute book on exit day. As I have mentioned, retained EU law will contain a broad range of deficiencies that need to be corrected; the intention is that those deficiencies can be corrected both at a devolved level and in Westminster.

In addition to the withdrawal Bill, there will be other EU exit Bills, which are absolutely essential for the way in which we can operate as we leave the European Union. The customs Bill will provide for a stand-alone UK customs regime on exit, and the trade Bill will put in place the essential and necessary framework to allow the UK to operate our own independent trade policy. I suspect Opposition Members, who respect the result of the referendum, would not argue against the need for a customs Bill or a trade Bill.

On the comments of the hon. Member for Ynys Môn about ports, the Wales Office is aware of the issues in relation to Holyhead port. I think I am right in saying that the Secretary of State has visited. I have recently had meetings with Irish Ferries, for example, to discuss the issue in detail. Although we all recognise the sensitive nature of the border in Northern Ireland, it is imperative that we ensure that the ports in Wales are also protected. The Wales Office is certainly very aware of that issue, and I am more than happy to deal with the hon. Gentleman on that in due course.

The trade Bill is also crucial because, as has been pointed out by many hon. Members, Wales is more dependent on exports than any other part of the United Kingdom. We saw a significant increase in our exports in the year to March 2017. When I hear the doom and gloom of Opposition Members about the Welsh economy, I would remind them that our exports are increasing, not decreasing, and we are exporting more to the European

Union than we did in the year prior to the decision to leave the European Union. That is some source of comfort.

It is also imperative that we have an immigration Bill that deals with some of the issues raised about the concerns of EU citizens and the wider implications. On the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff Central about her constituent and the lack of response from the Home Office, I would personally be more than happy to take that up on her behalf with the Home Office, if she would care to write to me about it. Such a delay in responding is simply not acceptable; I will happily look into it on her behalf.

We will also bring forward a fisheries Bill and an agriculture Bill, which will undoubtedly have an impact on Wales. Some 60,000 people are employed in the agriculture sector in Wales—we all know the importance of agriculture to our rural communities. We need to ensure that we have a functioning sector as we leave the European Union.

There are other pieces of legislation in the Queen's Speech that are important to Wales. We will bring forward a number of proposals, for example modernising the courts system and dealing with domestic violence through the creation of a domestic violence and abuse commissioner. Those issues are not England-only; they apply in Wales.

I will try to respond to some of the points raised by hon. Members. I have touched on the fact that a number of pieces of legislation in the Queen's Speech have a direct impact on Wales. Anybody who denied that would be wrong.

On the financial settlement for Wales, hon. Members have very short memories. Just before Christmas, we announced a fiscal framework for Wales that ensured a Barnett floor—something that has been called for by many interested parties in Wales for a very long time and was never delivered by the Labour party when they were in power in Westminster and in Cardiff Bay. It has been delivered by this Conservative Government. The fiscal floor currently ensures that for every £100 spent in England, £119 is spent in Wales. It guarantees that there will be a floor. In other words, because of that funding commitment, the Barnett squeeze will not happen again.

Over and above the Barnett consequentials, the Government have also delivered support for growth deals for Cardiff and Swansea. I assure the hon. Member for Ynys Môn that we are working very hard on achieving a growth deal for north Wales. The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) is in discussions with us on a regular basis on the growth deal for north Wales.

Stephen Kinnock: Will the Minister give way?

Guto Bebb: I do not have time.

I have recently met every council leader and chief executive in north Wales, and I will be meeting the final ones this afternoon. If the hon. Member for Ynys Môn wants to meet me about the growth deal, I would be more than happy to have such a meeting.

I would point out to the hon. Member for Arfon that he is incorrect in stating that there are no consequentials from the High Speed 2 project. There are: HS2 is included in the Department for Transport budget and therefore there have been consequentials.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Although it is not required, as a courtesy, the Minister normally allows the Member who introduced the debate time to wind up.

Guto Bebb: Yes, I am aware.

There have been Barnett consequentials to the Welsh Government's capital budget from HS2. I also support the fact that the Crewe hub is essential for north Wales and will be very positive for that area. I hope that I have highlighted that the Queen's Speech is not just positive but relevant for Wales, and that this Government are delivering for Wales.

10.58 am

Jo Stevens: I thank you, Mr Howarth, for your robust chairmanship this morning. I also thank all hon. Members on this side of the House who contributed to an excellent debate. The fact that we have debated much that was not in the Queen's Speech for Wales but should have been is indicative of the current Government's attitude, as is the fact that we have had no contributions whatever from Conservative Members to the debate, other than the response from the Minister. I am sure we will pick this up in September. I hope that "in due course" means September for a Welsh Grand Committee and that we can carry on with these discussions later in the year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Wales and the Queen's Speech.

Strategic Road Network: South West

11 am

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the strategic road network in the South West.

First, I welcome the welcome the Minister to his place. As you are aware, Mr Howarth, I worked with him on the nuclear issue and Hinkley Point. I also thank his Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), and my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) for being here. I am glad that my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) are here too. I am sorry about the pink specs, Mr Howarth—I managed to lose mine.

I am grateful to be able to raise issues about the road network in the south-west. They relate exclusively to that network, and they have to be cured. The strategy for the major roads can be a bit of a beggar's muddle, which roughly translates as a complete and utter mess, liable to cause confusion and dismay. I represent Bridgwater and West Somerset, and the M5 is our only official strategic route. It covers the whole of our area. If someone needs to get strategically to Watchet, Williton or Minehead, they need the A39. That road is every bit as strategic for hundreds of thousands of holidaymakers and for anybody who happens to live there, yet the M5 and the A39 come under entirely different management.

Most A roads in this country are looked after by county councils. All motorways and a handful of A roads are the responsibility of Highways England Ltd. Two years ago, the Government quite rightly shook up the old Highways Agency, turned it into a flash new company and hoped it would learn to operate within budget and focus more attention on customers. There was frustration in Whitehall that new roads took far too long to complete—we have all suffered from that. It would be much better, it was thought, if one company was given a big budget and simply allowed to get on with it. The Government also wanted to speed up the whole planning process.

A chief executive with an impressive track record was hired. Jim O'Sullivan used to be the chief engineer at British Airways, and claims he can still change the brakes, wheels and engines on an aeroplane, but I would rather he concentrated on his day job. After all, Highways England spends £7 million of public money every single week. That is enormous bucks, given that the highway under its control adds up to just 2% of the total road network. The company got a rap over the knuckles from the rail and road regulator in its first appraisal last year. The regulator said that it was not transparent enough about plans or accurate enough about accounting. I can think of quite a few level-headed Somerset people who would agree and go further.

Highways England has sparked a monstrous planning row that shows what is wrong with the whole process of strategic road development. At the end of the week, I will get in my car and drive home to the west country. I usually travel on the M4, then on to the M5 and home. Occasionally, if I am in a hurry, I will risk the A303 and the A358 into Taunton—my hon. Friend the Member

for Yeovil knows how tricky that is—but from drivers' point of view that is a gamble. They face swarms of druid-fanciers at Stonehenge, armies of articulated lorries struggling up hills and enough caravans to drive Jeremy Clarkson bonkers—all going at a snail's pace throughout.

You are probably not aware, Mr Howarth, that parts of the A303 are still single-carriageway. Most of the A358 is a bottleneck, and Taunton has become a snarled-up no-go area. As a matter of fact, there is no good reason to go anywhere near Taunton since the useless council lost its famous cattle market to Bridgwater and is allowing the shopping centre to waste away and die. Councillor John Williams is now the sheriff of a wild west tumbleweed town. He struts about spending oodles of taxpayers' money on gold taps and new showers for Deane House, and people say he is on the take—more of him later, I promise.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his rose-tinted spectacles. On the issue of strategic roads, does he agree that the other key road in the south-west that is worth a mention today is the A417—in particular the bottleneck at the Air Balloon roundabout, which prevents the link between the M4 and the M5?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is quite correct to highlight such situations. His constituents suffer in the same way as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil on those inadequate roads. We need a policy that covers A roads and motorways. My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester has done a noble job for his constituents, and I am glad he has raised that point.

Highways England had a brief to create an alternative route to the far south-west using the A303 and the A358, even if it effectively bypassed Taunton. As my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil is aware, it would have made much more sense to upgrade the A303 and carry on over the Blackdown hills with improvements to the A30. Devon County Council wanted that option, and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who unfortunately cannot be in his place today, argued for it. It would be a much shorter route, and cheaper too.

The most cost-effective solution is just to improve the M5 and widen it. It would save a fortune—problem solved. That would be it sorted. The trouble is that Highways England did not get the choice. It was lumbered with the A303 and A358, and it came up with a series of wildly expensive plans. Surprise, surprise, it picked the cheapest option, although it makes no strategic sense whatever. The result has been a storm of protest. Highways England has totally cheesed off Somerset County Council, which thinks the plan nuts. Highways England stupidly cancelled the public consultation meetings during the May general election campaign. Why? It has made so many blunders that the Campaign to Protect Rural England is threatening to take it to court for a judicial review—ridiculous.

Worst of all, Highways England will be using something called a development consent order to secure the right to build the road. It does not matter how many people protest or what the local council says, because development consent orders were designed to put time limits on all objections. Basically, unless the Secretary of State intervenes,

a development consent order can be a legal bulldozer. I should add that the long list of objectors to the proposal includes Taunton Deane Council, bizarrely, which desperately wants a new road but would much prefer a link with one of its plum building projects called Nexus 25.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the key issues with the A358 is that we must ensure that we have a north-south link between our parts of Somerset, which would enable the Somerset economy to grow to its full potential?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has been a champion for the A303 and A358 since he stood as a candidate. He has done a remarkable job in ensuring that the Government are fully aware of the feelings of the people of Yeovil. Yeovil and Bridgwater are the only two industrial towns in Somerset. This issue matters enormously given that the railway station for Yeovil is outside the town, so we have double strategic problems.

Nexus is a rosy apple in the eye of Tumbleweed Town's Wyatt Earp, Councillor John Williams. Quick on the draw as he is, Wyatt Twerp intends to make sure it happens. Anyone who objects could end up on Boot Hill with an overdose of lead poisoning. Nexus is a plan for a giant business park on green fields next to junction 25, off the M5. Wyatt Twerp's builder pals from Summerfield bought the plot cheap a few years ago. Taunton Deane now intends to use a local development order to force it through. Local development orders were designed for one purpose: to enable the development of brownfield sites, but Nexus is greenfield, and Wyatt Twerp is on the fiddle again with legal trickery to stifle objections. Local development orders, like development consent orders, make a mockery of consultation, but in lawless Tumbleweed Town that's the way they do things. Wyatt Twerp wants to win, which is why he complained so strongly about the plans of Sir Tim Smit, the architect of the world-famous Eden Project, which we have all been to and know so well. Sir Tim Smit wants to build an extensive complex at junction 27 on the M5. It is a well-engineered proposal from a team with excellent form. Sir Tim Smit understands consultation. He actually attends all public meetings in person, which is impressive.

Wyatt Twerp sees any rival development, even in neighbouring counties, as a dreadful threat. Right now, he is getting his posse together to ride out and lynch the man—bizarre, I know. Imagine: Sir Tim Smit's plans might lure people away from the invisible attractions of Tumbleweed Town.

My hon. Friend the Minister will be aware of another crazy caper dreamed up by Wyatt Twerp to merge West Somerset Council, which is in my constituency, with Taunton Deane. That could result in a new authority, no doubt to be called Greater Tumbleweed. West Somerset would end up without a single local office, and with no staff and few elected councillors. Wyatt Twerp organised a consultation process, which, as hon. Members would expect, was shallow, shabby, inaccurate and so badly drafted that few people took part. It was not worth the paper it was written on.

Once again, Wyatt Twerp is on the fiddle. His bid to merge has been submitted to the Secretary of State using a piece of law that gets around the need to consult

[*Mr Liddell-Grainger*]

anybody. Needless to say, my constituents are crying foul play. When they finally rumble his bent regime and boot him out, he would be very well qualified—dare I say it to the Minister?—to join Highways England as a consultant.

That brings me back to the A358 and the road that Highways England wants to build with no links to Nexus 25. I have a suspicious mind. I have already discovered that Summerfield Developments has bought another large plot of agricultural land, which happens to be remarkably close to all of Highways England's route options for the A358. At present, Summerfield would not get permission to erect a garden shed on it, but if the A358 becomes a dual carriageway, nearby land will become ripe for new homes and Summerfield will be quids in. I wonder how much more land it has an option on already. I wonder which well-known land agents are scouting on its behalf, and who else has invested in that beautiful green-belt corner of Somerset.

Perhaps Wyatt Twerp himself will come clean and tell us why he bought a 30-acre plot close to Stoke St Mary parish church all those years ago. He might claim that it was because of his love of rural scenery or his abiding affection for the great crested newt, which we have all come across. Perhaps it was because of his desire to safeguard a precious plot for posterity. Or was it an early bid for a garden town—“Williamsville”, for instance, which is a great name—which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil has championed? We know that there are fairies at the bottom of his garden and pink pigs flying above them, but the leader of Taunton Deane Council is a greedy builder at heart, and he must have known that 300 houses would fit on 30 acres. Wyatt Twerp bagged a bargain when he bought that land.

The point is this: if the A358 is turned into a highway, there will be huge building opportunities. Highways England understands Wyatt Twerp's ambitions. Taunton Deane Council has been involved in secret talks with Highways England for months, but it took a freedom of information request from a gentleman called Dave Orr, who is not one of my constituents, to prove it. Two weeks ago, he obtained a memo from Highways England's global consultants. Those experts recognised Taunton Deane's extraordinary plan to build 17,000 houses and advised that 3,460 could be built on the land near the motorway junction. As far as I can make out, Mr Orr is a fair man. He decided to alert officers of Taunton Deane Council and Somerset County Council in case they had not seen the document. Nobody reacted, so Mr Orr called the press. It was a story—it was all true—but Wyatt Twerp went bananas and ordered his deputies to threaten the local paper for publishing “fake news”. Wyatt had a nasty attack of the Trumps.

That is a revealing episode in a very sad saga. I believe that this is the wrong strategic route for the south-west. We now know for certain that any road developments around this green part of Taunton will bring extra houses by the thousand, which will affect my hon. Friends the Members for Wells and for Yeovil. No wonder so many people are angry. No wonder there is growing distrust of the system and growing contempt for the local politicians—my hon. Friends excluded—who have conspired to allow this to happen. On that point, I rest my case.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing this debate, which has the very wide title “The strategic road network in the south-west”, and on his extremely pungent and colourful speech. I will start generally and then focus on the specific issues that he raised and the area itself.

As my hon. Friend knows, our road network is the backbone of Britain. Let me remind him and colleagues that the strategic road network, which comprises approximately 4,300 miles of motorways and all-purpose trunk roads valued at more than £100 billion, supports the safe and efficient movement of people and goods. Whatever the optics might be in terms of the percentage of road length the network represents, it is vital to the UK economy and to our current and future economic growth. Around 80% of all goods travel by road, with about two thirds of large goods vehicle traffic being transported on the network. Some 4 million vehicles use the network each day.

As my hon. Friend will be aware, this Government and the previous Government have made a strategic decision to continue to develop the strategic road network by providing extra lanes on our motorways and improving key routes, but also by investing in parts of the country that have suffered due to poor transport connections. That is why the Government are investing £23 billion in England's roads, £15 billion of which will be spent on our motorways and major A roads.

That funding underpins what has become known as the road investment strategy, a five-year plan launched in December 2014 that sets out the schemes and funding levels from 2015 to 2020. In the five years from 2015, the Government will invest around double the capital in strategic roads that was invested in the five years from 2005. That is a record of which the Government and, in fact, all Government Members can be very proud.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on securing the debate. The Minister highlights the investment that is being made. Will he confirm that that will include finally sorting out the issues at Stonehenge that mean that so much traffic from London to the south-west ends up going via Bristol?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will discuss the A303 and Stonehenge later in my speech.

The road investment strategy is the biggest upgrade to our strategic roads—our motorways and major A roads—in a generation. It will see the addition of more than 1,300 extra lane miles to our busiest roads. The schemes cover every region of England; in the two years since 2015, 12 major schemes have opened for traffic and 16 more have started construction.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree with me and with Conservative-run Plymouth City Council that it is time

that we continued that investment in our strategic road network by extending the M5 from Exeter to the Tamar bridge?

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. The answer is that we have a number of funds available and we look forward very much to the submission of bids, which will be given the full scrutiny that they deserve and merit.

Let me turn to the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset. He started by referring to the A39, which I will touch on for a second. He will be aware that that is a local road, but as he also knows, the Government recently announced that from 2020, under the new roads fund that we have set up, which is entirely funded by vehicle excise duty—that is a tremendous innovation, or rather a move back to the future for our road network—we will segregate what we consider to be a major road network investment programme. I think that the A39 will be eligible to be funded under that programme. Once the consultation has been done and work is under way to programme that investment, my hon. Friend and local authorities will be absolutely welcome—indeed, they will be invited—to submit bids. I am aware of his strong feelings, rose-tinted spectacles or no, and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) about the importance of dualling that road in both directions.

Overall, the Government are investing heavily in the road network in the south-west and have committed some £2 billion to major schemes through the road investment strategy. Later this year, we will announce the preferred route for the A303 Stonehenge tunnel, which is a very significant project in its own right, and for the A358 Taunton to Southfields and A303 Sparkford to Ilchester schemes. I understand that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset has particular concerns—concerns that he expressed with considerable pungency—about the route that the A358 should take into Taunton.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Will the Minister reassure us all that, regardless of which of those routes and attendant end points for the A303 are eventually chosen, utmost priority will be given to completing that work as fast as possible? My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) cannot contribute to this debate—he is the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary—but I know that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) feel strongly that taking the pressure of long-distance traffic off the M5-M4 triangle and allowing it to make progress down the A303 corridor is absolutely essential for everyone who lives on the M5, as well as for the long-distance traffic that uses it to get through Somerset.

Jesse Norman: I very much take my hon. Friend's point. Of course, the point of the tunnel is not merely to safeguard the extraordinary and historic global asset we have at Stonehenge; it is also part of a much bigger programme of trying to improve the A303 for trunk purposes, in a way that is designed precisely to lift some of the pressure off other arterial routes. I take his point very well.

I should say that I do not recognise the description that has been given of Highways England. From my limited experience as a Minister, I know that it is not a perfect institution, but it has made significant progress since becoming Highways England. It is undoubtedly focused on the task of the effective delivery of schemes in order to get the best outcome for local people, which my hon. Friend mentioned.

John Penrose: May I reassure the Minister that there are those of us who do rather enjoy working with Highways England? It is certainly being helpful on the question of junction 21 of the M5 and junction 21A in my constituency. I can vouch for his point of view.

Jesse Norman: I am glad of that intervention, and if I may, I will proceed with my remarks.

To return to the A358, of course my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset made some quite colourful remarks about that. I am sure he will understand if I do not take a position on the issue, but he has made his concerns, and the public concerns of others, very well, and they sit in the record for further excavation and inquiry.

As my hon. Friend will know, Highways England recently held a public consultation on the routes that the A358 should take, and it will work closely with local partners to advise the Secretary of State and myself on the preferred route. Those schemes are just the first part of the £2 billion plan I mentioned to create a new dual carriageway route from the south-west to London.

If I may range slightly further outside the specific issue of the A358 and the A303, improvements to the A30 in Cornwall—both a planned improvement and one nearing completion—will extend dual carriageway standard road as far as Camborne. The Temple to Higher Carblake section opened last week and Highways England announced the preferred route for the Chiverton to Carland Cross scheme earlier this month.

Highways England is also creating a new junction on the M49 to support development at Avonmouth. The port of Avonmouth and the Avonmouth Severnside Enterprise Area to the west of Bristol currently have no direct access to the M49, which is hindering proposals to support economic growth in the area. A new junction on the M49 will improve access to those areas, ease congestion and contribute to the economic growth of the region.

Richard Graham rose—

Jesse Norman: If I may respond in anticipation of the much-welcome but inevitable intervention from my beloved colleague from Gloucester, a little further afield, to the north-east, Highways England is also developing the A417 Air Balloon roundabout improvement—I should say that it is not a small scheme. Potential route options are being identified for public consultation before the end of 2017. That scheme will tackle a missing link in the dual carriageway between Gloucester and Cirencester, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on his tireless championing of that important scheme, which will certainly have through benefits for trunk users of that road coming from Herefordshire to London.

[*Jesse Norman*]

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset has a particular interest in the M5 junction 23 Bridgwater scheme and wrote to the Transport Secretary recently on that matter. Let me turn to that, if I may. The Government's view is that it is vital that there be a good connection to Hinkley Point. The new power station—and one must not forget the existing power station there—is of strategic importance to the UK, and the Government will ensure that the road network around it gives all the necessary access to the plant and works. That will support local economic growth, housing and local jobs.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that up, partly because it affects the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) as much as mine, and also those of my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and for Yeovil (Mr Fysh). We have heard about Weston, and I certainly know, as will my hon. Friend the Member for Wells, that Burnham is a very tight junction. The Secretary of State has been helpful to Somerset MPs in sorting this out, but will my hon. Friend the Minister allude to the need for more capacity at all the junctions from 27 to 21? We may need to revisit that, but I am grateful to him for what he is saying about junction 23.

Jesse Norman: I absolutely take the point. It would have been remiss of me as the Minister not to have addressed this important issue, on which my hon. Friend has been vociferous—and rightly so—along with other colleagues in the past. That is why I have raised it now.

Highways England has been assessing a larger-scale upgrade of the Bridgwater junction, as set out in the road investment strategy. When my predecessor wrote to my hon. Friend recently, he relayed the fact that Highways England was continuing to collect data to inform its assessment so that it could continue to ensure the right solution for the local area. I will make certain that Highways England presses on with that process. I have encouraged it to continue to improve its engagement with colleagues—this is a valuable case in point—so that all relevant views are properly taken into account.

In addition, in March 2017 the Government named 27 proposed small congestion relief schemes that can be delivered quickly. The south-west was allocated some £32 million for improvements, better driver information and queue protection on the M5. Of course, we welcome further inquiries as to how junctions elsewhere in the region and on that road can be improved.

In the time that remains, I will briefly turn to the question of the future. As I have said, the £15 billion currently being invested represents a substantial increase in the rate of investment in roads, but even so, the first road investment strategy—what we call RIS 1—remains only an initial step, albeit more strategic than hitherto. That is why we have already started work on developing the second road investment strategy, RIS 2, which will handle further investment in the network beyond 2020.

The Department is currently gathering and analysing evidence about the performance of the network and the future pressures it faces. Of course, that is a dynamic process as further changes are made and ways of using

the road network themselves change. Central to that approach has been Highways England's work to refresh its 18 route strategies, each focusing on different sections of the strategic road network, which were published in March. As part of that work, Highways England gathered information from MPs, road users, local authorities and other stakeholders through an online public consultation last summer and through face-to-face meetings.

My hon. Friend will be particularly interested in the Birmingham to Exeter route strategy, which identified areas along the M5 where there are current and anticipated future pressures on the network. I am sure that also goes for other Members of all parties present in the Chamber.

We will use that evidence, and the results of a public consultation planned for later this year, to develop an investment plan that is affordable and deliverable and that will meet our key aims for RIS 2, specifically to support economic growth; improve network capability; enhance integration with local roads and other transport modes; reduce the number and severity of accidents; and protect the environment. We remain on track to publish the second RIS before the start of the next road period on 1 April 2020. In that context, I will pick up a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). That approach also needs to take into account some of the pressures that a route strategy has in relation to other arterial roads to ensure that the counterbalancing we have discussed is properly discharged.

While I am aware that the focus of this debate has been on the strategic road network in the south-west, I hope that I may acknowledge quickly the value of the local road network. Most journeys that use our motorways and major A roads start on the local road network. The Government continue to provide funding for local authorities and local enterprise partnerships in England to help fund large transport schemes that improve connectivity, ease local congestion and improve or update existing infrastructure, thereby helping to promote growth and deliver more housing. Most of the Department's funding for large schemes now sits in the local growth fund, with some £6 billion provided to local enterprise partnerships through different growth deals.

Since 2011, the Department for Transport has invested over £360 million in major local schemes in the south-west. As well as the largest schemes, we continue to fund smaller schemes designed to open up developments and help maintain roads and bridges. The Government are also keen to invest in road maintenance to make roads better for users. That is why £12.5 million has been made available to fix potholes—a topic of great interest to every member of this House—in the south-west.

Shortly, I plan to announce the winners of the 2017 to 2018 highways maintenance challenge fund, whereby the Government will be investing £75 million to improve smaller local roads, including through resurfacing, pothole filling and other infrastructure projects. In summary, we are delivering on our plans for investment in the south-west's road network, both strategic and local, to give the south-west the roads it needs for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Armed Forces

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I have a couple of housekeeping announcements before we kick off the debate. First, you may have noticed that the clock that we are working to is running about 40 seconds behind the annunciator clock. That will become relevant later when I put a time limit on speeches, because a lot of Members want to take part this afternoon. Secondly, in view of the climate, I am prepared to allow gentlemen to remove their jackets if they wish—but not their ties under this Chairman, thank you very much.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future shape of the armed forces.

As the new Member for Aldershot, the traditional home of the British Army, I am honoured to lead the debate. In the limited time I have, I will touch on the nature of current threats and dwell for a little longer on my central point, which is that our people—our servicemen and women—must be at the heart of our defence policy.

When we consider the future shape of the armed forces, we are seeking to assess current threats but also to predict what threats may arise in the future. That is very difficult, and the only certainty we have is that threats are and will continue to be manifold and deeply alarming. After 15 years or so of engaging in counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we still face a threat from global terrorism, which is more dangerous, more mobile and more transnational than ever before. It has recently struck in our cities, and, indeed, at the very gates of Parliament. The middle east is highly unstable, ISIS is diminished but not defeated, we have failed states, we have Hezbollah, we have a dominant Iran and we have North Korea in nuclear stand-off with the rest of the world. We also have a resurgent Russia and the rise of cyber-conflicts.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that one vital element of our national defence and resilience is the threat to our cyber-security? Is he concerned, as I am, about whether our armed forces and their hardware are fully protected from that threat, and whether they have sufficient capability to be effectively deployed to deter such a threat?

Leo Docherty: I share my hon. Friend's concern. I think we all agree that the internet has now been weaponised to an extremely alarming degree. That should be at the heart and centre of our defence strategy. I imagine the Minister will take the opportunity to address that.

We face today the simultaneous threats of state-on-state conflict and global terrorism. We are facing down those threats with our allies in NATO and elsewhere, such as our friends in the Gulf states. We will continue to need a very large and potent armed forces to do that; mass matters, and it will continue to matter. It will come as no surprise that, as a former soldier, I am and will always be an advocate for a bigger armed forces. In an ideal world, I would like to see not 2% of GDP spent on defence but somewhere nearer 3%. However, we have to

live in the real world, and we have to play the pitch we inherited. We are still dealing with the legacy of Labour's mismanagement of the economy, which left a large black hole at the heart of defence spending.

In my judgment, the 2015 strategic defence and security review did a good job of assessing and responding to the current global threats I described, and combined with the ongoing investment of £178 billion over the next 10 years, it will deliver a raft of impressive new hardware and, more importantly, an agile and highly deployable force. All of that is against the background of significant financial constraints. I am particularly pleased that elements of the new strike brigades formed as a result of that SDSR—including 4 Rifles, 1st Battalion the Royal Regiment of Scotland, 2nd Battalion Princess of Wales Royal Regiment and 2nd Battalion The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment—will be based in my constituency. We have two impressive carriers coming online, new submarines and new frigates, as well as a total and unreserved commitment to our continuous at-sea deterrence, Trident.

While we praise all that, we must, as parliamentarians and constituency MPs, always critically assess our own Government's policies. We must ensure that our procurement is smart and that the carrier group we are investing in can fight. We must ensure that 2% of GDP spent on defence actually means a real 2%, and we must ensure that projects such as the F-35 are completed on time and on budget. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will reassure us on that note today.

We clearly need significant force, but just as important, especially when it comes to dealing with global terrorism, is our approach and attitude towards using that force. I think the primary lesson of the last 15 years of expeditionary counter-insurgency wars is that it is only when we are discreet in the use of force, and when we work to empower and partner with local allies, that we achieve great results in combating terrorism.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. However, I am puzzled by his line of argument. He seems to be saying that expeditionary counter-insurgency warfare is what we expect to do in the years ahead, while at the same time saying we must be flexible. What does he think about the notion that NATO has this entirely wrong, that we are focusing on the last war and that the next war may well be, for example, in the north Atlantic or high Arctic? That is something that the Select Committee on Defence is halfway through studying.

Leo Docherty: If my hon. Friend is unsure of the meaning of my remarks, I am saying that mass is important—we absolutely need a very large and potent armed forces—but the lesson of the past 15 years in Iraq and Afghanistan is that we may get counter-productive results if we engage without the politics being right, as he will see from the remainder of my remarks. It is only when we engage and work with allies that results that match our interest and theirs can be achieved.

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, our good intentions were overtaken by the realities of local politics on the ground and an over-optimism about what the British state can achieve politically by the overt use of military force. We must guard against that in future. I learned that lesson as a soldier in southern Iraq more than 10 years ago. I remember one particular day when I

[Leo Docherty]

visited a police station run by an Iraqi police unit that we were mentoring in al-Amarah in southern Iraq. Despite our working very closely with them, I was alarmed to find, on visiting the interior of the police station, a picture of Muqtada al-Sadr, who was the leader of the Mahdi army—the very insurgent group we were fighting, supposedly with the Iraqi police. That kind of duality and duplicity undermined our capability and the likelihood of us having a positive outcome in Iraq.

I have carried that insight with me over the years, but for many others, including my friend and fellow soldier, Captain Richard Holmes, that duplicity and the central dilemma of our presence in Iraq had lethal consequences. Richard was a classmate of mine at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and went on to be a fine Parachute Regiment officer. He deployed on his second tour of Iraq in the winter of 2005 to mentor the Iraqi police—something he put his heart and soul into. Progress was made thanks to his efforts, but despite his commitment and earnest professionalism, the forces of sectarianism, violence, Shi'ite rivalry and Iranian meddling prevailed. One day, after leaving the very same police station that I had visited the previous winter, his patrol was struck by an IED, and he and his driver, Private Lee Ellis, were instantly killed.

The point I am making is that no matter how good or how dedicated the servicemen or women are, politics—in the middle east, it is often the politics of violence—will always trump good intentions. The lesson at the heart of this is that we must be discreet, and we must work with allies whose interests match ours and who genuinely need our help. That lesson and that approach should shape the way we do business in the future and the way we train and deploy our forces. If we follow that approach, we can achieve great results.

In Iraq, we are now having a very positive impact. Today we have more than 1,200 personnel deployed on Op Shader across Iraq and Syria, co-ordinating Royal Air Force airstrikes, taking the fight to Daesh and, critically, working very closely with Kurdish peshmerga forces, whose interests match ours. That type of involvement—helping our allies to achieve their goals with the bespoke use of expertise and hard power—is a model for the future. We can and should replicate that approach around the globe.

The other primary lesson we have learned from the campaigns in both Iraq and Afghanistan is that the current generation of British forces men and women are equal to the example shown by their forebears across all three services. Young men and women join the armed forces today in order to deploy. We are in their debt, and it is our duty to arm them, equip them and protect them as best we can. Our servicemen and women are this country's most precious asset, and we must put them at the heart of our defence policy. I welcome the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which will have a very positive impact on the working lives of our armed forces men and women. We should celebrate the fact that they are prepared to take risks. They are not victims, but heirs to a remarkable and magnificent tradition. The recent remarks made by the Chief of the General Staff about service personnel needing empathy rather than sympathy were very welcome and apt.

We must maintain our resolve to deploy whenever and wherever necessary. We must not lose our nerve. On that note, I will conclude my remarks by quoting from a letter sent to me recently by a veteran who, as a young commander, led a team in Afghanistan at the height of the conflict. At one point he survived an IED strike so powerful that it destroyed the armoured fighting vehicle he was commanding. His letter reads:

“In Afghanistan I was scared of many things. I was frightened of the Taleban, I doubted myself, I worried about the availability of helicopter medical support. The one thing I never doubted or questioned was the willingness of the soldiers under my command to fight tooth and nail. No matter how badly they were bleeding, no matter how cold, how hot, how tired or how dehydrated they were, time and again their willingness to take a step forward, put their hand up and say ‘ok then, let’s go’ was extraordinary. 18 year olds who had volunteered to go 5000 miles to protect the Afghan people. These much-maligned members of the ‘PlayStation generation’ were in fact the heirs to boys who stood at Waterloo, sailed at Jutland and flew in the Battle of Britain.”

I quote from that letter because those words so eloquently convey why we are proud to have the finest armed forces in the world, why our servicemen and women will always be our greatest asset and, importantly, why, despite all the financial and fiscal constraints of the current time, we should be confident and assured of our future as a formidable military power.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Nine Members have submitted their names in advance to speak. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.30 pm, so I am imposing a four-minute time limit on speeches. It may assist Members to know the batting order, so that they know where they stand: it will be Rachael Maskell, Robert Courts, Chris Evans, Jack Lopresti, Jim Shannon, Andrew Bowie, Luke Pollard, Eddie Hughes and—last but by no means least—Colonel Stewart. Those whose names have not been called will understand that they are not on the list. This is not an open invitation to make lengthy interventions; it is an indication that if they wish to intervene, they should keep it brief.

2.45 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on opening this debate so thoughtfully.

I want to pay my tribute to the armed forces and the incredible work that they do in an ever-changing and complex world that evolves day by day. We owe a debt to the vital strategic and critical thinking and actions of our serving men and women as they seek to de-escalate the risk of conflict and bring reparation when not in the throes of the theatre of war.

We know that building strategic alliances secures greater global resilience. We know too that warfare is changing and therefore the shape of our armed forces needs also to evolve. What is really important is that the needs of our armed forces are met. One thing that is clear is that they are not necessarily content at this time, as we saw in the continuous attitude survey this year, which did not make good reading for the Government. They feel let down. Only half are satisfied with the standard of their accommodation and less than a third with the maintenance programme—and those figures are in free fall. We know that low morale in the Army is

up by 12% and satisfaction with service life has fallen by 18% since 2009. Yesterday's Pay Review Body announcement will not help either. Only 33% of personnel are satisfied with their pay, 27% with their pensions and just 23% with the recruitment and retention pay. That is serious, and that is why it is so vital that we listen to our armed forces—which is exactly what I have done in York.

I can tell this Government very clearly that the community wants the armed forces to stay in York. The economy needs the armed forces to stay in York. The armed forces want to stay in York and the families do too, and they are a crucial part of our armed forces. After 2,000 years of the armed forces being in York, the cry from my city is that they should remain there. The City of York Council, which is a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, has resolved to oppose the Government's plans to remove the Army from York. All stakeholders, except for Government Ministers, have gathered together against "A Better Defence Estate".

The Queen Elizabeth barracks in Strensall and Towthorpe is where the 2nd Medical Brigade and 34 Field Hospital are based. We know of the work they do, not least their work in the recent Ebola crisis. They have recently received a £2.3 million investment, yet are due to close in 2021—a waste of taxpayers' money—despite wanting to remain in York. Imphal barracks in my constituency is also due to close by 2031. That will have a devastating impact, and not only due to the loss of 1,600 jobs from my city. The proper checks and balances have yet to take place, including economic and social impact assessments. Document JSP 507 says that those assessments must take place before closure proceeds, but they have not been carried out. I was told by the Minister's predecessor that it will take 18 months to do that.

The armed forces want to stay in York because Army families' children catch up with their education with our excellent education system, and the spousal employment opportunities and opportunities for future career development are there for all to see. The Nepalese community also wants to remain in my city, and their needs must be addressed. Most of all, I want to stress to the Minister that guarantees were given to my predecessor as late as 2015, after the rebasing programme, that the Army would remain in York. My plea is for the Minister to listen to my city and ensure that they do.

2.49 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this extremely important debate. I also welcome him to the House, because it is so important that we have Members with his experience to bring first-hand knowledge of the issues that we are discussing today and throughout our deliberations.

My brief comments will be about the need for flexibility. I am conscious of the words of the Select Committee on Defence: that in many ways we face a world that is "more dangerous and unstable" than at any time since the end of the cold war. The point has already been made that there is a real danger that we plan how to fight the conflict that we have just fought. Having spent 15 years fighting asymmetric warfare, we are in real danger of considering that that is the sort of warfare that we will always face, but of course we face, in the

east, a resurgent and much more aggressive Russia. We find ourselves in the extraordinary situation, which I do not think any of us would have thought a few years ago that we would be in, of having to defend and train against a potential conventional threat, with a need for training with heavy armour and eastern forces in the forests of eastern Europe, as opposed to the hot, high and sandy warfare that we have been engaged in for the last few years. My contention is that this dangerous world is best met by flexibility.

We must be careful because history is full of surprises. We know that as soon as we plan for one area of warfare, the one that we are most likely to be fighting will be totally different. The only way we can face that is by having the flexibility in our armed forces to meet the evolving threat, but how do we do that within the constrained budget that we have?

The first factor, as my hon. Friend rightly said, is our people. We must ensure that the armed forces are seen as an optimistic, exciting, challenging, profitable and worthwhile career, so that we attract young people to join and they know that they will learn a trade and, crucially, be looked after. That is why I place such importance on the armed forces covenant. I commend everything that the Government have done to ensure that retention rates in the armed forces are kept at the high level where they ought to be.

For the same reasons, I applaud the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill, which this House will see shortly; I look forward to seeing the detail of it. The Americans do a great deal of that, with greater use of reserve forces. I applaud the Government for looking at the issue, thinking creatively and ensuring that we can get the best from our young people as we go forward.

The two aspects to equipment are hardware and software. Let me deal first with hardware. I am very lucky that my constituency contains Royal Air Force Brize Norton, where the whole of the Royal Air Force's transport fleet is based, and we have the Voyager programme there. The Voyager has the classic capability of a tanker and transport aircraft but, because of the way the AirTanker consortium is set up, there is a surge capability. The aircraft normally can undertake air-to-air refuelling, and there is a relatively limited fleet for peacetime, but were we to need it, we have the ability to bring in a great many more very quickly. With the C-17, C-130 and A400M programmes, we also have outstanding transport capability, so we have very high capability aircraft, but also a greater number of less complex aircraft, which means we can have more for the resources available.

A great emphasis on intelligence is of course critical. That is why, particularly in terms of Waddington, I encourage the Government to keep the Sentry, the Sentinel and the Rivet Joint aircraft at the forefront of their mind—because it is that intelligence that we need to fight the wars that we will be fighting.

Lastly, I come to the software point. Of course, not all warfare these days is fought through hardware, kit and equipment. Much of it is software-based, and if we do not have the intelligence gathering and, crucially, the cyber-skills, we would very quickly find that our aircraft were unable to fly while the others were. Thank you, Sir Roger, for giving me time to speak in this debate. Flexibility is the key, because after all, history is full of surprises, as we know, and so of course will the future be.

2.53 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who spoke with passion based on his own distinguished service. Even though I am on the Opposition Benches, I also pay tribute to all those Government Members—who I am looking at now—who also served in our forces and served Queen and country with distinction. Thank you very much.

On Saturday 24 June, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who will respond to the debate for the Opposition, to witness our armed forces marching through Caerphilly town centre as part of Armed Forces Day. Anyone watching on that day would know the esteem in which the public hold our armed forces. If we asked anyone marching, they would tell us that they are able to serve only because they have the support of their family. However, many feel that they are being badly let down by the Government. No one will be able to give their best in theatre if they are worried about their loved ones back home, yet that is the reality that those living in service accommodation have to face each and every day.

All regular service personnel are entitled to subsidised accommodation, and those who are married or have children are entitled to service family accommodation. The accommodation is provided by the Ministry of Defence and managed by the private contractor CarillionAmey. The armed forces covenant dictates that service accommodation must be of good quality, in an appropriate location and reasonably priced. However, under the current contract, very few properties seem to meet those criteria.

A National Audit Office report earlier in the year about service accommodation was absolutely damning. One family were left without hot water and heating for weeks, despite informing the contractor, CarillionAmey, that they had a seven-week-old baby and a four-year-old. In fact, in 2016, an NAO report found that satisfaction levels with the contractor's maintenance request responses and the quality of maintenance works undertaken had reached lows of 32% and 29% respectively. At the Public Accounts Committee hearing, we were even told that such was the worry on the part of the Department that the contractor had to face the then Secretary of State for Defence to discuss the way forward.

Since taking up the contract in November 2014, CarillionAmey has consistently failed to meet the key performance indicators that it was contracted to attain. One case in particular highlights the poor treatment of service personnel and their families by the company. The wife of a serviceman reported that their family had been provided with a damp and mouldy property and, despite there being alternative accommodation available, the contractor refused to move them. The family reported that the property's carpets were stained and the oven was dirty, but rather than cleaning the property and getting rid of the mould on the walls, CarillionAmey painted over it. On top of that, the family spent up to hours on the phone to the contractor every day for eight weeks trying to get somebody to help them to deal with the property's many issues.

James Gray: The hon. Gentleman is of course right to criticise CarillionAmey—in many respects it is not great at all—and his party of course does not like

anything being contracted out, but if we took the contract away from CarillionAmey, what would an incoming Labour Government do?

Chris Evans: I am criticising CarillionAmey quite rightly, but what I am saying is that we need a different contract or a different way of tendering for these contracts. This is not good enough; it is not good enough for forces' families or for our men and women in the field. I hope that the Minister will take these comments away and look with urgency at the way the contract with CarillionAmey is being managed. This is not good enough, and I think all of us in the House would agree with that.

On 24 occasions, the family to whom I was referring were told that they would receive a call back regarding the issues, yet they did not, and technicians refused to progress the issues and deal with them. It would be an absolute disgrace if any family had to suffer in that way, but these are the families of our bravest men and women. Joining the armed forces is not like joining Barclays or Tesco; we are asking people to risk their lives each and every day for our safety at home and abroad. No one should underestimate just how huge an impact the standard of service accommodation can have on those in the armed forces. Impact on family life is the most cited reason why people leave the armed forces, and accommodation is a critical factor in that.

I urge the Minister to look at the contract again, to look at the way CarillionAmey is treating our forces' families and to do something about it. I think all of us in the House can agree with those sentiments.

2.57 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, even if only for four minutes—I will keep to that. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this crucial debate and on the eloquence of his speech. It is a privilege to be able to speak in the House about our armed forces as someone who has also worn the Queen's uniform. I must declare an additional interest: one of my sons, Michael, recently joined the Army and serves with the 1st Regiment Royal Horse Artillery as a gunner—the fourth generation of my family to do so.

I note the Government's policy on the armed forces as stated in the Gracious Speech:

"My ministers will continue to invest in our gallant Armed Forces, meeting the NATO commitment to spend at least two per cent of national income on defence, and delivering on the Armed Forces Covenant across the United Kingdom."

For me, the key words are investment, commitment and covenant—words that we in this House would do well to reflect on. Investment means not only providing the resources that our armed forces need, but supporting and encouraging our servicemen and women and their families. Of course, it also means that we must invest in training and equipping our armed forces so that they can do the job we ask them to do. We all remember the shameful stories of service personnel in the 2003 Gulf campaign who were ordered to give away their body armour only for casualties to be suffered subsequently; indeed, there was one fatality. Also, there is no point in having defence assets if they cannot be used. Training on equipment such as fast jets can be expensive, but it is necessary to maintain the war-winning edge that our forces need.

Commitment means that the UK supports its allies, whether in NATO, the Commonwealth or elsewhere. Not only will we need to do that in time of need, but we will help to develop and train our allies' armed forces so that we can prevent conflicts from developing in the first place. It also means that when we commit to spending a minimum of 2% of GDP on defence, we mean a minimum. Some colleagues are calling for 3%, given the uncertainty of the times we are in. That is something we should consider seriously, looking at all the aspects of defence policy and the fact that we are looking to increase our global presence and reach. What matters most for our service personnel and allies is that the UK has the capability to make a difference when we arrive in a theatre of operations.

Last but certainly not least is covenant, which has almost a sacred feel and echo to it. It reminds us that the bond between service personnel and the society that they serve is special, in which case it must be a duty of the Government and this House to ensure that we keep our side of the covenant. Too often we hear tales of administrative incompetence, which adversely affects the lives of our service personnel. Support for families and decent housing is often seen as an additional administrative burden that detracts from frontline fighting efficiency. With an all-volunteer force and a need to recruit a reserve force as well, we must ensure that the conditions of military service are as attractive as in any other vocation, particularly when service personnel are injured and need good medical support and rehabilitation.

I am going to skip forward in my speech. Representing a constituency that is a world-renowned hub of excellence in aviation and defence manufacturing, with companies such as Rolls-Royce, Boeing, GKN and Airbus, I can speak with conviction of the benefits that this brings to local communities and the wider economy. Aerospace Defence Security, the defence manufacturers' trade association, estimates that in 2016 the UK defence sector directly supported 142,000 jobs, of which 32,000 were in research, design and engineering. The sector also supports 4,300 apprenticeships along with the MOD, which supports a further 18,000 apprenticeships, making it the largest provider in the UK.

I am running out of time, but broadly we need more spending, to maintain our commitments and our global reach and technological advancement, but never forget that we need men and women who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. We should never forget that.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for bringing forward an issue of great concern to all of us here. I declare an interest, having served as a part-time soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years and in the Royal Artillery for 11 and a half. When I look around this Chamber I see many hon. and gallant Members who have also served, and I congratulate them on being here.

I have said this before in this House, but it bears repeating: our armed forces are without doubt the premier armed forces in the entire world. We have highly trained and highly skilled individuals who place Queen and country above their own lives and often ahead of their family lives. I am often concerned when we debate these issues in this House that it is very easy to concentrate on

numbers and not on the human aspect. Some of the contributions so far have dwelt on the human aspect, and I understand how important that is.

I understand that times are changing, and I can grasp the importance of technology and of having the best and brightest minds in the Army. I watch my granddaughter, who can work a tablet without any bother. There is a real need for us to recruit the best into the ranks; however, having served in uniform, I also understand the discipline and understanding that comes from someone making their way up the ranks. I believe that the recommendation to recruit civilian cyber-warfare specialists, aviation experts and tech wizards is essential—hopefully the Minister will respond to that—but there must also be a carefully monitored structure that enshrines the qualities that are taught and lived while in training and in the first years in the armed forces. Those of us who have served and those who have an interest in the armed forces will understand what I mean.

In my office we saw at first hand the effects of the cyber-attack. Indeed, probably all of us in the Chamber witnessed how hard it was to work in an office without the use of computers—it was back to the old times of telephone calls to the executive and the road service. The attack showed just how reliant our society has become on computers, and it is clear that the armed forces must be at the top of their game to handle situations and scenarios like that.

I wish to address the issue of falling numbers in the armed forces. The Minister, whom I and all of us in this Chamber greatly respect, understands the issue—82,000 was the number set out, and we are at 78,000. What is being done to ensure that the target is met? In particular, the special forces regiments are suffering a shortfall in numbers, as others are, especially in those training in information technology and communications. I am anxious to understand what format measures will take to recruit those extra numbers and get back to where we were.

I am conscious of time, but I will just say this: in the confidence and supply co-operation plan that we have with the Government—I want to make it clear that we are very pleased to be part of that, by the way—we secured some more recruitment for Northern Ireland, based upon the fact that our recruitment levels are already up and we can fill some of the gap that I mentioned. The Government responded to us on that point, and we are doing some more recruitment through the Territorial Army and the reserves. I am also conscious of the fact that there are those who have risen through the ranks of life and those who come in at graduate level. A delicate balance of understanding must be found.

I will quickly touch on the spending plans, another issue that weighs upon my heart. While we can and must be wise and good stewards of money, we cannot afford to cut back on the planned spending of £178 billion on kit and maintenance and projects such as the F-35 fighter, Dreadnought nuclear submarines and the P-8 Poseidon spy planes. On procurement, I make a plea to the Minister to make sure that we get some of the contracts in Northern Ireland. The Minister knows that I want that—I have said it before, and I ask for her consideration on that matter. We look to her to honour the spending commitments and to honour our troops.

I would and could not finish without thanking those who wear our uniform for all that they do and reiterating our determination to do right by our past and present

[Jim Shannon]

military personnel. I say to them: your sacrifice will ever be appreciated, and we will stand with you in and out of uniform.

3.6 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I would like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this very important debate.

Britannia Royal Naval College in Devon stands high on a hill overlooking the Dart estuary and the town of Dartmouth. It is an impressive building, designed to instil a sense of pride and purpose in all those who have marched up its famous steps, to awe all who set eyes upon it and to leave no one in any doubt about the importance that this island nation places on the strength of its Navy. Along the front of the building are engraved the following words:

“It is upon the Navy, under the good providence of God, that the Wealth, Prosperity and peace of these Islands do depend”.

Those words are as true today as they were when they were first set down more than 340 years ago. For although it is very easy to forget, this is an island nation, forever dependent on open sea lanes and peace on the high seas for its survival.

To prove that point, let me go through some facts and figures. Some 90 % of global trade is carried at sea. The top ten trading nations in the world account for 47% of the total of world trade, and the UK is the fifth largest trader, with 17.3 billion tonnes of goods imported alone, with a value of more than £525 billion. UK ports, the shipping industry and trade support more than 600,000 jobs in this country, and 40% of the UK’s food is imported at an annual value of more than £32 billion. Oil is of vital importance to my constituency in Aberdeenshire, and more than half the world’s oil supply is moved through set maritime choke points. Disruption at any one of those can have a devastating impact on the oil price. The strait of Hormuz between Iran and the UAE, for example, sees 17 million barrels of oil per day pass through a 29 mile-wide corridor. In the very recent past we have seen how easy it is to disrupt that trade. It is estimated that piracy off the Horn of Africa in the last years of the previous decade cost global trade \$6.9 billion per year, before it was brought under control though the actions of, among others, British vessels working with our partners in Operation Atalanta—an operation with its headquarters here, at Northwood in Hertfordshire.

My point is that as we are a global, island nation, maritime trade is our lifeblood. As such, a strong, flexible, globally deployable Royal Navy is vital. The future make-up of our armed forces must reflect that, and not only for the reasons that I have set out. If we truly want to be at the forefront of the war on drugs or the war on terror, and to be a nation that does not shirk from its international responsibility to provide humanitarian aid to parts of the world ravaged by natural disasters, we need a senior service that is equipped with the tools, and manned with the people, to do the job.

Julia Dockerill (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Flexibility has been a watchword in this debate. Would my hon. Friend support flexibility in the budgets of

Government Department’s engaged abroad? I would like to see aid, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, defence and security budgets interlinked, to allow us to focus on the most pressing priorities in each country where we have a presence, rather than seeing each Department working on their own independent causes without the proper co-ordination that is sometimes required.

Andrew Bowie: I very much agree with my hon. Friend’s sentiments on that point.

I stand here proud that, for all we talk today about moving towards a more flexible, agile armed forces, armed and trained to fight the asymmetric wars of the future, the Conservative Government have proven, in not only words but actions, that they do not suffer, as other Governments have, from sea-blindness. In this year of the Navy we have already seen major developments, including HMS Queen Elizabeth, the largest warship and most advanced aircraft carrier in the history of the Navy, sailing from Rosyth in Scotland and undertaking sea trials before arriving in Portsmouth later this summer. Her younger sister, HMS Prince of Wales, will enter the water for the first time at Rosyth—again, in Scotland—later this year. The Type 26 frigate programme, to be built in Scotland, continues apace. The first of the Navy’s five next-generation patrol ships, HMS Forth, also built in Scotland, will begin her sea trials.

Outside Scotland—I suppose I have to mention that as well—design and manufacture will continue on the multi-million pound Crowsnest, the early-warning eyes in the sky system for the helicopters that will protect the new carriers. The first of our four Tide-class tankers, RFA Tidespring, has arrived and is undergoing UK customisation work. The fourth Astute-class submarine has entered the water at Barrow. I am proud that it is Scotland, specifically HM Naval Base Clyde at Faslane, that is home to our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, the cornerstone of our defence policy. I am equally proud that it is the Conservative party—and, it would seem, only that party—that is truly committed to renewing our deterrent, thereby contributing to the security of not only ourselves but our friends, overseas territories and allies.

I know there are problems in recruitment and retention. I know that the propulsion issues on the Type 45s are not good for the image of the fleet or for the morale of those serving in it. Cuts, although necessary after we were left, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot mentioned, with a £30 billion black hole in the defence budget, obviously left the Navy feeling leaner and more stretched than before. Many, possibly including me, hanker for the days when ships lay six abreast at Pompey, Devonport or Rosyth, when you could cross the Solent without even getting wet—at least, that is what is said. Those days are sadly behind us. What we must do now, and what the Government are doing by not only increasing the budget but for the first time in many years increasing the size of our fleet, is to ensure that as we debate the future of our armed forces in general, the Royal Navy is fit to fight the battles of the 21st century.

3.11 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), because I also intend to speak about the Navy. I want to

pay tribute to not only our armed forces but all the civilians who work with them. It is important that their contribution is also noted, because without them we would not have the armed forces that we have today.

Defence is an issue close to my heart. I have asked the Minister a few questions on the subject, and I am sure I will ask more. I am the son of a submariner, and the future shape of the Royal Navy is important not only to my family but to Plymouth, which I represent. The challenge now is how to adapt the Navy to serve the challenges that we face as a country. I fear that the 2010 and 2015 SDSRs did not do us many favours in creating the shape of the Royal Navy that we need. We have too few escort frigates. We need more, and they need to be more capable in their defensive and offensive weaponry. I am deeply concerned about the armaments on the Type 26 and Type 31, because they do not provide the full-spectrum capabilities that those frigates require in the face of the threats they will be asked to meet.

I am concerned that there is a broad capability gap in our Royal Navy at times, which can best be summed up in what is happening with HMS Ocean, a Devonport-based helicopter carrier. In 2015 there was much hullabaloo in Plymouth after rumours that the Conservative Government were going to scrap HMS Ocean. We had reassurance from the Minister that that was not true, but three months later it was announced that HMS Ocean was indeed to be scrapped and sold off. I am concerned that the Government have still not addressed in the latest SDSR the lack of helicopter carrier capability, especially carriers able to operate in littoral waters, and that needs to be looked at. It is inconceivable that we would put a carrier—a capital ship of that size—so close to the shore that it can adequately deploy a two company lift without having the support of a littoral capability. Our carriers do not have such capability, so I am concerned as to how that fits.

HMS Ocean is not our only amphibious craft. HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion, two more Devonport-based ships, are also vital to the Royal Navy's ability to deploy. One of them is tied up alongside at the moment and the other one is back on sea trials. We need to look again at our full-spectrum capabilities in the Royal Navy to make sure they are adequate.

On the frigate conundrum, I am pleased that the Minister has ordered three Type 26 frigates. I would like to see a full order book. I was in nappies when previous Governments ordered the Type 23s, the workhorse of our Royal Navy, but if we look at the costs of splitting the batches of the Type 23s and at the procurement of ships in the past, we know that we derive greater value from ordering in larger batches. The large cost of the three Type 26s could be reduced further if we ordered more of them at the same time. There could be a risk that we will switch production from Type 26s to Type 31s, which means there is a concern about how skills and efficiencies can be derived from the yards in Scotland where they will be produced.

We have a huge opportunity to make sure that the Type 31 is an adequate and capable frigate. At the moment the outline for the Type 31 frigate includes only one offensive weapon, which is its main gun. Will the Minister think carefully about the capabilities of not only the Type 26 but the Type 31 as well? If we are asking the Type 31 frigates to be put in harm's way, having one offensive weapon on the entire ship is insufficient.

I am pleased that the Artisan radar for the Type 23s will continue on the Type 26s, but there is much to be done on capabilities. Will the Minister think again about how much weaponry we put on the Type 26s and the Type 31s?

3.15 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this debate. In speaking this afternoon I feel a huge degree of deference to those in the room who have military experience, but we need to reach out to the public if we are to have any discussion of the future of our armed forces. In Walsall North we have three remembrance monuments: in Willenhall, Bloxwich and Short Heath. I will work with the Royal British Legion to ensure that we continue the Remembrance Day parades in those areas, although unfortunately the police are no longer agreeing to road closures for those areas.

Things have changed hugely since the world wars. At the time when I was born, we had Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. I understand that we had 21,000 troops stationed in Northern Ireland at that time. Sadly, 700 of those military personnel lost their lives owing to paramilitary attacks. Coming forward closer to home, the Good Friday agreement and lengthy diplomacy means that now we have only hundreds of troops there instead of thousands.

What is the state of the British military in terms of troop numbers? I read an interesting article from 2014 in *The Daily Telegraph* at the weekend that made a perhaps unfortunate comparison between the number of troops and the number of hairdressers that we have in the UK. At that time we had 185,000 hairdressers, but only approximately 160,000 troops. That feels like a disproportionate balance to me. Where are we today? The papers that came to us in preparation for this meeting suggest that we have not reached the 2020 targets, although we are trying hard to do that, and the adverts tell me that I have people who were born in Willenhall and Bloxwich, but have been made in the Royal Navy.

Our troops are operating in 80 different areas around the world. People in Walsall North will be familiar with some of those areas, such as the Falklands, but perhaps not so familiar with Bahrain, other than as a venue for the Grand Prix. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot has written about Bahrain, and I have read his papers. I understand that we have recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of Anglo-Bahraini relations, and the port there is the second busiest area of activity for the Royal Navy outside of Portsmouth.

We deploy troops around the world, but the nature of combat is changing. On 7 October 2001, American forces used the first drone strike two months after 9/11. They have subsequently argued about whose fault it was that it hit the wrong target. The RAF took delivery of 10 drones in 2007. For the benefit of people in Walsall North, I point out that those drones cost approximately £10 million each and fire Hellfire missiles at a cost of £120,000 each. That is sophisticated but expensive equipment. They can fly for 30 hours and can be operated by people thousands of miles away. However, they are no replacement for boots on the ground. We cannot over-exaggerate the reassurance that local people in war zones around the world will feel from having the

[*Eddie Hughes*]

benefit of our brilliant, brave and well-trained troops offering them reassurance on their safety for the future. The first rule for any Government is that they must protect their residents. We must ensure that we provide sufficient funding for them to do so adequately.

3.19 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We all know that the first duty of Government is the defence of the state, which historically has meant defending it at any cost, but that may no longer be the case. Western public opinion is not prepared for ever increasing amounts of money to be spent on defence. The last really big conflict, the second world war, was the best part of a lifetime ago. Never in modern history has there been such a gap between wars in Europe. Not being threatened by war makes the public increasingly reluctant to divert funds from such things as hospitals and schools towards military forces—just in case they are needed—when we need those hospitals and schools now. Clearly the armed forces will have many fewer soldiers, sailors and airmen than they did in the past, and almost every one of their training or operational activities will be gauged against cost.

The days of large-scale operations and exercises are over. We shall definitely need more specialised troops—special forces. Those forces are clearly expanding. The Special Reconnaissance Regiment—I was in one of its antecedents—has been formally established, and a parachute battalion is now specifically tasked with supporting 22 SAS. Increasingly we must expect our military forces to operate on the streets of the United Kingdom in plain clothes, supporting the police, the special branches and the security forces on such things as surveillance. It takes 20 people to watch one person. Also, the country is taking the threat of cyber-warfare seriously—witness the establishment of 77th Brigade, which combines Regular Army and Army Reserve forces. It draws on specialists nationwide, and does not necessarily look very military in what it does. Hacking can be more deadly than any gun.

Clearly our armed forces will be much smaller than in the past, which is disgraceful. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) that we do not have enough troops; 82,000 is laughable. The total number of soldiers, sailors and airmen in uniform is about 160,000 to 170,000, which means our armed forces are smaller than they have been since the 17th century. Of course I want 2% of GDP to be spent on defence, but I want more than that: I want us to sort out what we need to spend on defence. We should conduct our reviews by looking at what we need—not against a figure. Some have suggested that the days of armoured vehicles are over, but developments such as the Russian T-99 and the Chinese Type 99A1 suggest that that view is not held by everyone. Armed forces must still be designed to combat state-on-state conflict. It is our duty to have decent soldiers who can deter.

3.24 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger; I appreciate the opportunity to be squeezed into the debate, and I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this important

and timely debate. I want to focus on a small number of issues that have been taxing my mind for some time, with regard to the structure of the British armed forces. A number of hon. Members have spoken with great knowledge about the senior service, the Royal Navy. No one has specifically discussed the RAF, and a crueler man than I am might suggest that that is because they are the RAF, and they kind of deserve it—but I would not want anyone to think that. [*Interruption.*] Ah, no—my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) mentioned the RAF, so never mind, that is forgiven.

I want to focus on the Army, but some things that I say will be broadly applicable to the armed forces as a whole. I will echo some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, to the effect that the key word is flexibility. I was pleased that Her Majesty outlined in her Gracious Speech the Government's willingness to introduce the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill. This is the right time, if not perhaps slightly overdue, to recognise the different demographics of people joining the armed forces. I cannot help thinking that if we were better at managing flexible working for armed forces personnel we would not lose so many people at the pinch point where personal and family circumstances and military commitments conspire to put them under pressure that forces them to leave. If we could find a way to manage the transitions from full-time to part-time and back, we would not lose so many highly experienced and important individuals.

I am going to be an unapologetic nerd on the subject of equipment. As a Conservative, I obviously believe that all the questions of the future are answered somewhere in the past, and I draw the Minister's attention to other periods in our military history when we have been under huge—often existential—threat as well as severe financial limitations. It should be noted that in the brigades and divisions that went ashore at Normandy the Sherman tank platform had commonality across a wide range of weapon systems. There were the standard Shermans, with the Sherman Firefly in support, the Sexton 25-pounder armoured gun and the Achilles anti-tank gun, all based on a common Sherman chassis, which meant that spares and repairs were easily and efficiently delivered to the front line. I welcome the fact that we are moving to a shared platform now for our strike brigades, and I urge Ministers not to do what we have done throughout our history, which is to start with the best intentions for commonality and shared platforms, and then drift until finally the hard-working men and women in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers are presented with a plethora of platforms that they have to repair and maintain during conflict. Flexibility as to people and platforms must be the watchword.

3.28 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on bringing the issue before the House. It is one that affects us all, irrespective of our background. I have been struck by the thoughtful, intelligent and knowledgeable contributions to the debate, which have done the House proud.

All roads lead back to the last strategic defence and security review, and it would be inappropriate if I did not mention the preceding one, too, which was an extremely

rushed and botched job as a preparation of the country for its own defence. However, the current SDSR is perhaps, if anything, slightly over-ambitious, in that many of the things it contains are difficult to deliver in the timescales. Indeed, it ignores some future challenges and, as has been mentioned, falls into the trap of fighting the last war when the Government should be considering the future threats facing the nation, and some of the opportunities for gain, such as using defence for the growth of the economy.

In Scotland, we are seeing cuts to bases and the diminution of our defence footprint. HMS Caledonia in my constituency, Fort George in the highlands and Glencorse barracks in Edinburgh are all under threat, and that is after decades of an imbalanced defence footprint across the UK. Many Members have mentioned bases and the support they have in their constituencies, whether in Wiltshire or Hampshire, which seem to be awash with military bases. I remind hon. Members that the Royal Navy surface fleet is based no further north than the south coast of England.

Andrew Bowie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Chapman: I will try to make some progress. Just give me a second if that is okay, and I may take an intervention later.

The Navy, for example, has more admirals than ships, and not one of those admirals is based in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales. If there is to be another SDSR, it must balance the strategic defence needs of the whole of the UK.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), who has just departed, has been a long-standing advocate of ensuring that the UK, and, by extension, Scotland, takes more account of the threats that face us from the north. The fact that we do not have a surface ship based in Scotland to protect our coastline from increasing Russian submarine incursions into our waters needs to be considered in any future SDSR.

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman says that there are no surface vessels based in Scotland, but that is patently untrue. The mine counter measures squadron is based solely at Faslane, which if I am not mistaken is north of the border in Scotland.

Douglas Chapman: What a tremendous example: one single minesweeper to deal with the whole of the North sea and the north Atlantic. I am sure everyone in Scotland will sleep easy in their beds tonight.

The hon. Member for Aldershot started his speech by talking about the importance of people. The overall issue is that all three services are currently running significantly under strength—I think the figure across the three services is in the region of 5%. I am told that some critical parts of those services, such as submariners, are about 25% under strength at the moment, and there is continuing pressure for qualified technicians and engineers. While I know that the Minister has made some good progress on recruitment and retention, which we welcome, that has clearly not gone far enough if we are to protect our nation at home, to defend communities here at home and look at our international obligations.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On the positives, does the hon. Gentleman recognise the contribution of our cadet training forces across the United Kingdom, such as the 383 Alloa Air Training Corps in my constituency, and that we are investing in youth, which will help supply the manpower for our forces in the future?

Douglas Chapman: I am always happy to endorse a neighbouring constituency and the work done there. Again, recruitment into cadet forces and support for them is important if we are to build up the defence structure and infrastructure we need and invest in people from a very young age to ensure that they have the skills and competence to deal with future threats.

There has been much discussion in recent days about the 1% pay cap, and while we immediately think of teachers, nurses and people who work in the public sector, that cap is having a huge detrimental effect on our armed forces. Is the Minister in a position to consider the Government's policy on that in terms of recruitment and retention? For the people currently in our armed forces, there is often a much more attractive life for them in civvy street, where they are not away from home for months on end and the pay and conditions are much more amenable to family life. Will the Minister commit to considering the pay deal in a future SDSR? The issue for her in doing that is that the budget is predicated on an annual 1% increase in pay for all armed forces; any more than that and the overall defence budget begins to become seriously unbalanced. With a Government whose stated aim is to live within our means, there will be no wage increase for our serving personnel beyond the 1% until the Government promote another, more flexible SDSR.

On other financial commitments in the budget, big ticket items such as the F-35 and P-8 are two examples of very expensive pieces of kit procured in the USA. We have seen those costs rise because of the weakness of the pound, which makes imports more expensive, sometimes to the tune of 20%. I know the Minister has previously said that we are hedging as much as we can to ensure the budget is protected, but we cannot protect 100% of costs involved in the current SDSR through hedging.

My final point is on shipbuilding and the Navy, which is critical to what is an island nation. After much asking, pushing and haranguing, the Minister will know that the national shipbuilding strategy is still to be published. As some people in Europe would say, “The clock is ticking.” We need a commitment to replace the Type 26s and Type 31s—ships used to protect our aircraft carriers. Although there has been an announcement for three, which is welcome, three is not 13. The clock is ticking on that one. We need an SDSR that does not fight previous wars but balances the needs of all of the UK and truly meets the needs of our serving personnel and their families. On all those issues, the clock is ticking.

On Monday, *The Times* talked about some of the problems with the F-35 programme. Sir Richard Barrons called for a move away from metal and platforms and to think seriously about how to construct armed forces fit for

“warfare in the information age”.

[*Douglas Chapman*]

That is where we are at the moment. I hope the Minister will give some consideration to the points raised and consider producing another SDSR that will meet the needs for a new century.

3.37 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this debate. No doubt, the fact that he was the Conservative candidate in Caerphilly in 2015 stood him in enormously good stead in terms of his future career.

We have had a good debate, with a variety of contributions. We have heard about the Navy and the Royal Air Force as well as the Army. We have heard about Scotland, accommodation and some of the problems and dilemmas that the armed forces face in the future. We all agree that the armed forces deserve our unreserved, full and unqualified support—we are all united on that.

It has to be said that when I saw the motion of the debate on the future of the armed forces, what sprung to mind was the problems we have seen at the Ministry of Defence in the past few months, and the continuing problems that have been widely reported. There have been reports in *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* only this week about: F-35 Lightning aircraft and their cost and suitability; Type 45, 26 and 31E surface ships; the lack of surface-to-air missiles in the Navy; the difficulties of the Astute submarine; problems with the Ajax armoured vehicle programme; the Warrior capability sustainability programme; and the difficulties with the new Queen Elizabeth carrier. The list could go on and on. I want to ask the Minister specifically: when will we see the new shipbuilding strategy? It has been promised and promised, and promised again. It is high time that we saw the strategy. When will it be published?

On top of all of those difficulties, there is the lack of personnel in our armed forces. The Army is, as we have heard, woefully under strength, and rumours are rife that there may well be further cuts in the future. The RAF could certainly do with more personnel, but the shortages are most acute—arguably in the short term—in the Royal Navy.

That is happening at a time when there is greater uncertainty and unpredictability across the world than ever before. Against that backdrop, the United Kingdom is in the process of withdrawing from the European Union and questions are being asked by our traditional allies about our future co-operation with them. It has to be said that even the Americans are questioning Britain's international commitments and our resolve to make sure that our armed forces are properly equipped, with sufficient and appropriate personnel. Our answer to those concerns must be that we want to see military co-operation with our European partners continue, and more than anything else we must strongly back NATO.

In the Army, despite the Government's promises—including their 2015 manifesto commitment to have an Army strength of 82,000—the full-time strength of the Army in May 2017 was only 78,150. That is nearly 4,000 short of the MOD's 2020 target. According to information provided to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), the Minister of State for Defence, Earl Howe, has indicated that many

of the infantry training courses that we have in this country have large vacancies. That applies to Catterick, Purbeck, Winchester and Harrogate, for infantry training courses for 2015, 2016 and 2017. This must be a cause of concern for us all.

In the Navy, there is a worry that personnel are being transferred from other ships to the new carrier because of a lack of qualified personnel. The problem is most acute regarding engineering skills, and so serious is the problem that the Royal Navy is now offering short-term contracts for ex-Navy personnel who are in their late 50s and even for 60-year-olds. Surely this highlights the need for a long-term strategic commitment to proper and well-financed training.

With regard to the Army, much of the recruitment is now in the hands of Capita, a private sector company. The contracts signed with Capita have been much criticised by the National Audit Office and there is growing disquiet in the Army itself about Capita's performance. Capita would argue that it is now meeting the targets set for it, but I am told that many of the young recruits are being falsely attracted and when they realise what the Army is all about, they leave. There is a growing problem with retention and it appears that Capita is contributing to it.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Aldershot, lessons must be learned from Iraq and Afghanistan; indeed, I would argue that lessons must be learned from all the conflict situations that we have been involved in recently. We have to recognise that the threats that we will face in the future will not be tackled simply. There is the ongoing threat of terrorism, which may assume other forms, but, as has been mentioned, there is also the threat of a growingly assertive Russia. That threat will not go away in the near future.

What we need in the future in response to those new threats is flexibility, diversity and adequate levels of funding. Yes, 2% may not be enough, certainly as it is defined by the Government, but we need appropriate co-operation with our allies, which will help to ensure the most vital ingredient of all—the good morale of all our armed forces.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): It is truly an honour to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Roger, and it is a privilege to respond to this debate. It has been a very good and effective debate on a topic that we often do not have the opportunity to discuss, so I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing it. I also congratulate him and his gallant colleagues on participating in it. It has been truly fascinating to hear of his distinguished service and the contribution it makes to our deliberations in this place.

I would point out that it would normally be the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who would respond to this debate, but he is going out to visit some of our brave men and women on deployment at the moment, so he sends his regrets for not being with us today.

Several common themes emerged in the debate. I will attempt in the time available to me to touch on each of them. The first was the importance of the armed forces covenant in all our communities. I hope that everyone

here today can share with me the aspiration that next year, when we have the 10th anniversary of Armed Forces Day, we will help our local areas to put on a really tremendous celebration. I am proud to have been part of the Government that enshrined the armed forces covenant in law in 2011.

We also heard about some of the issues around accommodation; in particular, from the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who spoke very forcefully. A new contract was announced today with Carillion. In the last financial year we put another £68 million into accommodation, but I will certainly pass back what the hon. Gentleman said about the issues he has seen in his constituency.

I certainly heard a lot of support from Government Members for spending at least 2% of GDP on defence. I hope that the Labour party shares that aspiration; it was in its manifesto.

Wayne David: We do.

Harriett Baldwin: Nevertheless, it is a shame that we have not had quite as good a turnout of Labour Members as we have had of Government Members.

A number of colleagues mentioned the Armed Forces (Flexible Working) Bill. That has started its passage through the House in the Lords, and I was glad to hear a range of supportive voices from the Government Benches for that legislation.

We heard about the issue around the base closure at York, which is scheduled to happen in 2031. We hope that setting such a long-term time horizon will give people the chance to plan around it, and of course there will be significant investment in the Catterick garrison, which is about an hour away from York, in terms of basing decisions.

Bob Stewart: I really must protest, Minister, that in my constituency there is not one military unit, and I want that rectified. What is she going to do about it?

Harriett Baldwin: I think that everyone can see that my hon. Friend himself embodies that military unit. Beckenham is well served in terms of the voice of the armed forces.

A number of hon. Members talked about celebrating the year of the Navy. It is a very exciting year, with HMS Queen Elizabeth going off on her sea trials from Scotland recently. It was also very exciting to announce recently the first of the new frigates, the Type 26. I assure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) that not only will the way we are ordering the frigates ensure that we have those eight anti-submarine warfare frigates, but it will provide the best value for the public purse. That idea is behind the approach we are taking.

As far as the Type 31e is concerned, we are still in the pre-concept phase on that, and the approach that we take on procurement is that we will always make decisions at the last responsible moment.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give an assurance that she will encourage the use of as much British steel in the new frigates as is humanly possible?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. We have published our requirement—I think it is about 4,000 tonnes of steel per frigate—on the Government pipeline website, and we encourage our contractor to look where possible to procure British steel.

As for the other issues raised on the naval front, a number of hon. Members asked about the national shipbuilding strategy. I can certainly say that it will be published in due course, but we are aware of the excitement in Scotland among those awaiting the report. Given the previous exciting events I have mentioned in terms of the Navy in Scotland, we do not want to overexcite the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) with everything all at once.

Douglas Chapman: I can assure the Minister that I am an extremely calm person. The time we have been waiting for the shipbuilding strategy has become unacceptable. We were told in previous debates and in answer to questions that the strategy was expected by spring. Then, in the Minister's own words, it was expected by summer. Going by the weather outside, it is summer. Can she give us a date for when she expects to make the announcement?

Harriett Baldwin: I am pleased that we are giving the hon. Gentleman ships. This week, we are cutting steel on the first of the Type 26s. We have had the HMS Queen Elizabeth sea trials. We will be naming the HMS Prince of Wales later this year. I was up in Govan cutting steel on an offshore patrol vessel earlier this year. We are giving him ships, and he will get his shipbuilding strategy in due course. By the way, he is wrong to say that there is no admiral in Scotland, because Rear Admiral John Weale, the Flag Officer for Scotland and Northern Ireland, lives on his road in Argyll and Bute.

Douglas Chapman: To clarify, I am not the Member for Argyll and Bute.

Harriett Baldwin: I apologise. The admiral lives nearby.

I want to reassure colleagues on the stories in *The Times* this week about the F-35 joint strike fighter. We strongly disagree with the conclusions that the journalists came to. We are confident that the programme is within its budget envelope, despite the fluctuation in the exchange rate. We are also proud of the amazing capability it is demonstrating. We already have 10 of the planes in the States, as colleagues will know. We have about 100 British pilots and ground crew over there, with the pilots learning how to fly them. I have had the pleasure of speaking to one of them, who used to fly the Harrier. He said that this jet is the most amazing jet he has ever come across. The Navy and the Air Force are excited about the arrival of the planes into the UK.

In terms of our overall aspiration for defence, our vision is that we will protect our people, our territories, our values and our interests at home and overseas through strong armed forces and in partnership with allies to ensure our security and to safeguard our prosperity. This debate is a welcome opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to the defence and security of our country and to the armed forces, which so many Members have spoken about and of which we are all so very proud. I pay tribute to the many servicemen and

[*Harriet Baldwin*]

servicewomen who are currently involved in operations at home and overseas to ensure our safety, security and prosperity.

Our armed forces are exceptionally busy. More than 24,000 servicemen and women were deployed on operations at some point during the past 12 months. The RAF has carried out some 1,300 air strikes in Iraq and more than 140 in Syria as part of our comprehensive strategy to defeat Daesh, working with our global coalition partners. Nearly 400 British soldiers are providing engineering and medical support as part of the United Nations mission in South Sudan. Some 500 personnel are still serving in Afghanistan, working with the NATO mission to support the Afghan security forces. With NATO, we have deployed a battlegroup to Estonia. The Royal Navy continues, as it has done since 1969—that is nearly 50 years—to provide our nuclear deterrent patrols, which are at sea every minute of every hour of every day. The Navy maintains an enduring presence in the Gulf and the south Atlantic.

There are many, many other operations and deployments in which our forces are demonstrating daily their unparalleled commitment and dedication to duty, and I am sorry I can mention only those few examples in the time available. This debate is about the future shape of the armed forces. I remind Members that two years ago the Government announced the biggest programme of new investment in our armed forces for a generation. The 2015 strategic defence and security review identified an uncertain world—several colleagues have reiterated that—that is changing rapidly and fundamentally. In response, the SDSR defined the role, size and capabilities of the Navy, Army and Air Force for the next 10 years. Joint Force 25, which is now coming into being, will ensure that the armed forces remain able both to conduct the full range of operations that they might be called upon to undertake and to succeed against ever more sophisticated and capable adversaries.

Colleagues mentioned cyber-security, which is a very important area of investment. We announced a further £1.9 billion investment in the SDSR to go into our cyber capabilities, whether that is to defend the homeland, to deter people from attacking us or in the offensive capability that has been used in the conflict in Iraq and Syria. We have the fully comprehensive national cyber-security strategy too.

In the time available to me, I will skip quickly through some points. It is important to emphasise that we are committed to increasing our defence budget in every year of this Parliament. That increase is not only linked to the size of the economy, but will be at least 0.5% above inflation every year for the rest of this Parliament. We are already the second largest defence spender in NATO and the fifth largest in the world. We will sustain that investment by continuing to meet the NATO guideline.

We plan to spend £178 billion on new equipment and equipment support between 2016 and 2026. Colleagues raised points around that, but that investment will allow us to maintain the size and capabilities of the armed forces with impressive new equipment.

I have mentioned the first of the new aircraft carriers. The second is coming along pretty snappily behind. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said, they are the largest ships that have ever been built for the Royal Navy. It is an immense achievement for those who designed and built her, and for those now serving aboard her. We have also committed to building the four new Dreadnought-class ballistic missile submarines to provide our nuclear deterrent through until the 2050s at least. I can confirm that we will have eight new Type 26 global combat ships—the anti-submarine warfare ones—and steel will be cut on the first of those by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence tomorrow in Glasgow. I have mentioned other points about the Navy.

I wanted to talk about equipment for the Army. Divisions will be further reinforced by enhanced communications, which is very important. There will also be improved Warrior infantry fighting vehicles. I simply disagree with the tone of the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who talked down what we are doing and talked down all these programmes. The programmes are incredibly complicated and complex, and the people involved in delivering them are to be admired and thanked. We are also doing a life extension programme for our Challenger 2 tanks. We are ordering 50 upgraded Apache and Chinook helicopters.

Without having enough time to touch even the tip of the iceberg in all the things that are happening, I will conclude. In every aspect of what makes our armed forces among the very best in the world—whether that is the equipment they operate, the training they undertake or the men and women who serve in the Navy, Army and Air Force—the Government are working and investing for the future; a future in which Britain has the right armed forces to ensure the safety and security of our people.

3.59 pm

Leo Docherty: Thank you very much for your chairmanship today, Sir Roger. I thank the Minister for responding and all colleagues who have taken the time to come and contribute today. The Romans were fond of saying, “If you wish for peace, you must prepare for war”, and I will be conclude by saying that I am confident that this Government and her Ministers will allow our great country to do just that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future shape of the armed forces.

Closure of Sovereign House, Newport

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the closure of Sovereign House in Newport.

It is a special pleasure to meet under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. We know of your great contributions to debates in this House, in the Council of Europe and elsewhere, but it is the first time that I have had the chance to serve under your chairmanship.

The closure of Sovereign House in Newport is causing great anxiety in the city and elsewhere, because there is a threat to other jobs. We are not Luddites in Newport. We are very proud of the civil servants we have there, who have behaved magnificently over the past 50 or 60 years. They are of growing importance in the economy of Newport because of the collapse of much of our manufacturing industry. They have done marvellous work and we are greatly proud of the contribution they have made. They are certainly at the heart of the Newport community.

Our civil servants turned out to be absolutely right on one of the few things on which they disagreed with the Government. They were very supportive of shared services, which was a disruptive but very successful Government move to concentrate services in Newport, but when there was a move to privatisate services, the people involved quite rightly objected. They were absolutely right to do so, because we went from a position of having saved the country £120 million to one in which there was a loss.

As I have said throughout my time in Parliament, having watched the civil service grow, prosper and provide a marvellous service for the country, the concern is based not on any Luddite proposal or unbalanced view, but on the fact that the civil service goes through various stages in which there is a holy grail. It used to be the Next Steps agencies, and then it was outsourcing, and now we are in the era of the super-hub—people take “super-hubism” up with an almost religious fervour. I am sure that young civil servants are told, “If you want to have a successful career, go into hubism, because that’s the way we are going.” The momentum takes over.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. What the move to super-hubs neglects is the importance of having the jobs in local communities and the support they give to local communities. It also disregards the needs of workers, particularly those with caring and family responsibilities, who have the advantage of jobs close to home.

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend makes his point with great force. That is precisely the position. People are attracted to super-hubs because they want their career to leave a legacy. If they can think that they have built super-hubs—great phallus symbols—in various places, they can relax when they eventually retire to their haciendas in Spain. It is something to be achieved, but it is not always rational or right.

I thank the Minister for having met my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and myself to discuss the matter. We want to see a clear, practical exposition of why this decision is the right one.

To my knowledge, Sovereign House has been operating since the early ’60s and has provided jobs right in the heart of the city for all that time. There are 182 people working there now, but there is capacity for 400. It is a great asset to the city. One point that is not always taken into account is that the vibrancy of the city centre depends on the workers who are there. They have their lunch in the city, use the shops and so on, so they add to it. If a city is to thrive and survive, we need that working population at its heart. Where does that point come into the calculations of those who make the decisions?

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend quite rightly speaks about valuing the civil service jobs in both our constituencies, which we always speak up for. Does he agree that we not only risk losing the skills and expertise of those dedicated Department for Work and Pensions staff, but could end up spending vast amounts more by creating a more expensive super-hub that people will have difficulty travelling to?

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must not fall into that trap. If we are going to take a decision, let us see all the facts laid out. Making people’s jobs convenient for their homes is of paramount importance—it is at the heart of the Welsh Government’s policy and I believe that they would say the same. They do not see this mania for super-hubs and bringing everything together as the answer.

There are fashions. There is a fashion for devolution and for economy of scale, and then we go in the other direction and there is a fashion for concentrating activities. These things go on, and we should not be borne along without making a reliable, scientific assessment of the advantages and disadvantages in this case.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the possible closure and relocation of the offices in his constituency and in mine, in Merthyr Tydfil, will have a massively detrimental effect on the local economies in small towns across the area? Does he also share my concern that the added burden on staff having to travel much longer distances—in some cases requiring up to six bus journeys—would put undue pressure on workers travelling to work in those new hubs?

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Although it is Newport that is mentioned in the title of the debate, the threats are spread right around—Merthyr and Caerphilly, the Newport service centre, Cwmbran pension service and the Gabalfa DWP centre in Cardiff. They are all under threat. It is difficult to get on a balance sheet what being told that they have to travel miles further, with more awkward bus routes, means to someone who is already struggling to get to work—particularly women with parental responsibilities—and who may just be managing to cope at the moment.

We know—not from the Government but from elsewhere—that there is a plan for a hub in the Treforest trading estate, which was set up after the slump in the ’20s. It has seen the success, and has been the graveyard, of many enterprises over the years. We do not want to see the Government go down this path without fully considering the human consequences.

[*Paul Flynn*]

One of the great successes that we have seen in employment is in making buildings accessible to the disabled, including people in wheelchairs. It is now possible in many jobs for people to use the lifts and the desks, and to use the public services. We are going to add to those problems. Where do we put that in the equation?

The Government might talk about big being beautiful and the benefits of having a large group of people together, but modern technology teaches us that it is as easy to talk to someone in Australia, or indeed in any part of the world, using various computers methods, such as Skype, as it is to talk to someone sitting at the desk next to you. The location is therefore not that important, and nor is the idea of a hub.

Will the Minister assure us that the Government have made a full assessment of the alternatives to changing Sovereign House? It is an old building and I am sure that it is run down—they all are—but they should not just dismiss it and say, “We can’t do anything with it. The hub is the only object we are considering and the only way we are going.” There should be a proper, full assessment of the costs of bringing Sovereign House up to standard. I hope that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will look at these issues. I have had the pleasure of being on the Committee for many years, and I will be going back to it. We must consider locations for the civil service in the future. There has not been a glorious record of unparalleled success recently—far from it. We need proper parliamentary surveillance of such decisions.

Has the Minister consulted fully with the Welsh Government on the closures and relocations? This seems to be in conflict with the policy of the Welsh Government, who have the motto, “better jobs closer to home”. They have gone that way, and we can all see the advantages. There are problems with the flow of traffic going into and out of Cardiff and Treforest—the bottom of the valleys—at that time of day. It is far better to expand Sovereign House than to move the jobs further away.

Has the Minister completely ruled out any compulsory redundancies? What is the situation? There is great anxiety among those involved. Some people are already at their limit of travel, and others may have already moved from another location. Can we guarantee that they will not be put under pressure? Have the Government looked at the equality impact of their proposals? Do they realise that women will be unfairly penalised by the change? Have they carried out an impact study of how the closures will affect the local Newport economy?

Jessica Morden: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is unfortunate that the Public and Commercial Services Union and staff learned about this plan from a leak on an architect’s website before Ministers had a chance to do an equality impact assessment of the decision on staff? Does he agree that if the equality impact assessment shows, as we think it will, that staff with travel difficulties or caring responsibilities will experience difficulties, the Minister should think again?

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am grateful to her for that intervention.

We are not looking for a reversal of Government policy if the change makes sense, but they have to prove that it makes sense not just in economic terms but in human terms. The hub will cause disruption, as I believe it will contain many more than 1,000 people. It will be a man-made hub. There are natural hubs in various parts of the country. Those in Blackpool and Newcastle, for example, have grown up due to certain unique circumstances.

This is a question of lumping together offices that have worked magnificently in Merthyr, Cardiff and Caerphilly, because of someone’s administrative theory that hubs are better. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who has been very courteous and open about this. I hope that he will keep an open mind and say that the Government will look at this and balance the full costs—not just those that show up on a balance sheet, but the heartbreaking human problems that are likely to arise, particularly for the women who are now employed in south Wales and are likely to be transferred to the Treforest hub.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, may I point out, for transcription purposes, that the Chair is Adrian Bailey, not Sir Roger Gale? I have been called many things in my time, but never Sir Roger Gale.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): That is something we share, Mr Bailey. It is a delight to see you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newport West (*Paul Flynn*) on securing this important debate about the closure of Sovereign House—an office of the Department for Work and Pensions—in his constituency. I thank him for his powerful words about the contribution made by the civil servants who work in Newport and elsewhere.

The Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone. We seek to protect the most vulnerable while supporting everyone to fulfil their potential and play their full part in society. That includes reforming the welfare system to make work pay, and examining our assets to ensure we are deploying our resources effectively.

As colleagues know, the private finance initiative contract with Telereal Trillium expires in March 2018. That gives us the opportunity—in fact, the imperative—to review which offices we will need in the future and how our estate will be managed. We have sought to deliver value for the taxpayer and make best use of the space available, while continuing to provide vital support to claimants and pursuing our reform agenda. In January, we announced proposals to rationalise the DWP estate. Those proposals encompassed most of our Jobcentre Plus offices and processing centres.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My Torfaen constituency is adjacent to the two Newport constituencies. As the Minister is aware, there is a proposal to relocate the jobs that are currently at the Cwmbran pension centre down to Treforest. Can the Minister confirm whether any assessment has been undertaken of the effect on the Torfaen economy of the removal of those jobs from Cwmbran? If one has been, is he willing to share it with me?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will come on in due course to the rationale for creating the new facility, which, as he said, will be at a site in the Treforest area, and the effect on the five places whose staff will feed into it, including Newport.

The announcement on 5 July finalised the plans to rationalise the DWP estate, which include merging some smaller and underutilised jobcentres, moving some to new buildings or shared Government premises, and creating larger strategic back-office sites. The changes will enable the Department to offer a more efficient service while delivering value for the taxpayer, and will save more than £140 million a year over the next 10 years.

Eight out of 10 claims for jobseeker's allowance, and 99% of applications for universal credit full service, are now made online. That, together with the lower unemployment rates, means that there are fewer face-to-face initial meetings, and that some of the space is under-utilised. Our plans reflect how customers interact with the Department today. The changes are not about a reduction in frontline jobcentre staff. On the contrary, jobcentres are actively recruiting staff. The changes are being made in consultation with DWP employees and the trade unions. That will help preserve the important local knowledge and community understanding held by our staff, with customer service being maintained.

We plan to maintain the vast majority of jobcentres in Wales. Three are merging into nearby sites. Upon consultation, the moves have been received positively by some staff, who will join larger teams in which they can gain new skills and experiences. I believe that in itself will result in better service for customers. We want our back-office operations to reflect the Government's hub strategy, which aims to consolidate the delivery sites of departmental functions. However, in Wales in particular, we considered it important to retain offices away from Cardiff to preserve and grow employment in places where it is needed. It is worth mentioning that we are also growing our back-office presence at our Swansea site, which will grow to around 460 people, and at Bridgend, where our staff will eventually total around 350. All in all, our back-of-house processing presence in Wales will increase by about 20%.

Of course, the change of most significance to the hon. Member for Newport West is the opening of the large DWP office in the Treforest area, just south-east of Pontypridd, in 2020-21. That strategically placed site will enable us to merge functions from five nearby smaller processing centres, including Sovereign House in his constituency. We intend to expand services at the new site and eventually grow it to around 1,600 staff, boosting employment in the area. The building will be a modern, digitally enabled working environment.

I understand that the relocation and consolidation of offices in south Wales will cause some disruption to staff. To maximise the number of staff at those five offices who could transfer to the new site, we studied their home postcodes to help determine that site's location. We were determined to retain staff who had built careers with us and minimise the loss of their valuable experience and expertise.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: When that postcode analysis was done, was analysis also done of the public transport options between those postcodes and the new centre?

Damian Hinds: Yes, looking at both car transport and public transport opportunities was of course part of the analysis when these changes were evaluated.

The Treforest area borders some of the most deprived areas in Wales, and choosing it supports the aim of the Welsh Government's valleys taskforce of creating "better jobs closer to home", which the hon. Member for Newport West cited. I met the Welsh Government's Minister for Skills and Science last week to discuss our plans and how we will support our staff through these changes.

In March this year, there were 212 staff at Sovereign House and only about 50% of the building was in use. As I mentioned, we assessed the distance that staff would travel to work at the proposed new site. Newport is 21 miles, or a 26-minute drive, from Treforest. There is also a bus, which takes around an hour and 11 minutes. Of course, journey times will differ depending on where staff live in relation to the site.

From 2021, we will start to move staff to the new site. We want to retain Newport colleagues, along with their skills and experience, and we have deliberately chosen to phase the moves so that people have time to make decisions about their futures. We are also prepared to pay staff members' excess travel costs for up to three years to assist their transition. Along with other Departments, the DWP will continue to be a significant employer in the area, and I expect the skills and experience of people who work at Sovereign House to be in demand. These changes to back-of-house sites will have no effect on claimants in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, as the jobcentre there will remain open.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I would go into detail about the rationale for the new site, including the financial rationale. Our strategy for the new service centre in the Treforest area is to bring colleagues together at a single location, resulting in better use of space, increased efficiency in how we work, and greater opportunities for staff development and progression. However, there is also a financial rationale. Fitting out a bespoke new right-size property is better value than refurbishing our existing older properties. Although that is not necessarily universally true for all buildings, the sites in this region are particularly old.

Refurbishing older sites can have quite a high cost, as it generally entails substantial infrastructure requirements, which might include installing more lifts, air conditioning, heating, lighting, and cabling and other technology to increase bandwidth for digital services and call centres. Although we have not acquired specific refurbishment quotes for the buildings in question, industry benchmarks suggest that refurbishing all our existing buildings would cost between 50% and 100% more in fit-out than setting up a new building. Of course, such refurbishment is also disruptive both to our work and to staff. We would need to vacate a property for six to eight months and incur the cost of moving and of temporary space for that period, or move within a building multiple times to free up floors for refurbishment.

Jessica Morden: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Lady forgive me if I see how we go? If time allows, of course I will.

We also expect a new building to have significantly better environmental credentials and better energy efficiency than our old buildings, creating savings in the long term.

[Damian Hinds]

The hon. Member for Newport West rightly asked about the risk of redundancies. Of course we want to minimise that risk. It is impossible to be absolutely clear at this stage, not least because we are talking about a move that is some years away, but we anticipate that approximately 20 staff might not be able to move to the new site. Now that announcements have been made, it is possible to be clearer about employment and career opportunities, and we will have detailed one-to-one meetings with staff between now and then.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have met our equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 and paid due regard to the impact of the proposals on our communities, our staff and the customers they serve. He also mentioned the requirements of people with disabilities and how office facilities have become more accessible over time—a development we all welcome. It is of course worth considering the fact that new buildings can often be designed with the specific needs of our staff in mind, including features such as improved accessibility.

Jessica Morden: Will the Minister publish the proposed budget for acquiring the land and for designing and building the proposed hub?

Damian Hinds: As I think the hon. Lady knows, there are some things that are commercially sensitive and that it is not possible to release, and there are other things that it is possible to release. I am happy to follow up with her about that in correspondence.

I know that there is also interest in whether our plans will affect the roll-out of universal credit. I assure hon. Members that the changes take full account of the roll-out of the full universal credit service. We have ensured that our schedule of changes has the flexibility to react to changing demand—both expected fluctuations and future economic trends. From this month, we are expanding universal credit full service roll-out to 30 jobcentres a month and putting extra resources into those jobcentres and the service centres that support them.

As the way we interact with our customers changes, so do their needs and expectations. Reforms have increased our online interactions with claimants so that face-to-face contact can be used for those who require additional support. We are committed to retaining an accessible jobcentre network and continuing to serve customers in all parts of the country. Our work coaches will continue to offer face-to-face support—a core part of our service—at our sites, but customers now have a range of ways to access employment support, including email, telephone, post and online.

Around 3 million more people in this country are in work than in 2010, and youth unemployment has fallen by 375,000. The employment rate has risen to 72.9%, which is a record high. In Wales, a near-record high of 1.44 million people are in work. Now is the right time to consider how we can make best use of our resources to help bring into work those who are able to join the workforce while retaining support and safeguards for those who are not.

Question put and agreed to.

Thameslink

4.30 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered Thameslink passenger services.

A recent customer satisfaction survey on commuter trains by Which? ranked Thameslink third from bottom. Thameslink registered an approval rating of just 32%; it was ranked above only the beleaguered Southern and Southeastern. I want to make the Minister aware of that passenger dissatisfaction today and suggest some improvements.

My constituents report cancellations and delays almost every day on the network. Over the last twelve months, trains have been plagued with technical problems. One constituent told me that last year alone he counted 15 broken-down trains on his journeys, including two on the same day, 14 August. Cancellations are often made at short notice. They cause later trains to be extremely busy, which makes it difficult for passengers to get on or off, giving rise to what have been called cattle-truck conditions and meaning that trains often cannot stop at their planned stations. Constituents tell me that on a bad day, which is not unusual, it takes them about two hours to get from London to St Albans, despite the 19 to 22 minutes timetabled for peak-time journeys. I have been told of constituents who have given up their jobs because they cannot afford the extra childcare—some nurseries charge an extra £50 per hour’s delay—or are unable to see their children in the evening. Many are consistently late for work despite leaving home earlier and earlier.

The Train Suffragettes are 500 mostly female parents in my constituency who were so fed up with the poor service they receive that they set up a group to show their collective unhappiness. They have shared with me their terrible experiences trying to balance work in London with family life in St Albans. They have missed school plays and parents’ meetings and rarely get to put their children to bed. Persistent delays have driven many of them to quit their jobs, and some have even moved away from the Thameslink line altogether. One mum told me:

“After calling in favours too many times from too many people and being late for nursery pick-ups three times in one week alone (once where I was actually stuck on the train for an hour with no phone signal and so unable to call anyone at the nursery), I quit my job in the city in October. Financially a difficult decision but I’d had a skinful of the stress of the commute, wondering if my train home would be on time or if I would have to sprint from the office to get the earlier train, which was often cancelled too.”

A lot of technical problems have been reported with the new Siemens 700 trains, mainly with electrics, software and heating. The doors often fail to open, especially at St Pancras, because they are now controlled by the driver; one day a train sat at the station for about 20 minutes because the driver could not open the doors. I know that Thameslink is aware of those problems. There has been some welcome recent progress, including an increase in Govia Thameslink’s public performance measurement from 60% to 83%, but that is still well below the national average of 88.95%.

Over the last year, Network Rail was responsible for 54% of delays, Thameslink for 42%, and other causes for 4%. We appreciate that ongoing Network Rail works

have an impact on the line, but that is no excuse for rail services not to provide a reliable timetabled service or to try to deliver improvements to it. My constituents not only suffer a poor service but get far less generous compensation than Southern Rail passengers when incidents occur. That cannot be acceptable. Network Rail should have better lines of communication with Govia and passengers. People need to know as quickly as possible why they have been delayed and what they can do to avoid disruption.

In the 2016-17 financial year, one in 11 trains run by GTR was cancelled or more than 30 minutes late—the worst performance of all the rail operators in the country. In period 3 of 2016-17, GTR had a cancellation and significant lateness percentage of 15.7%, compared with a 5.7% national average. In period 3 of 2017-18, GTR had a considerably reduced failure rate of 6.6%, but that is still nearly double the national average of 3.7%.

In my first debate on this matter in 2012, I said that First Capital Connect, which then held the franchise—it has now been replaced by Govia—was ranked

“lowest in the country, including value for money, punctuality, sufficient room on trains, satisfaction with the stations and how the train operating companies...dealt with the delays.”—[*Official Report*, 2 February 2012; Vol. 539, c. 342WH.]

Five years on, despite the change of franchise, nothing has changed. GTR still consistently ranks among the operators with the lowest customer satisfaction public performance measures.

The failings that other hon. Members and I raised five years ago remain failings today. Something must be done to improve Govia passenger services for all those who rely on them. It is a simple premise that to deliver an efficient, mobile workforce, we need a decent, well run and affordable rail transport service. People of all ages expect a rail service fit for the 21st century. The travelling public are being asked to pay ever more for their rail fares, and we in Parliament must ask serious questions about the services they are experiencing up and down the country.

I could not speak in a debate on commuter train services in my constituency without referring to the shadow being cast by the Radlett rail freight proposal, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and I believe may have a catastrophic impact on the already hugely inadequate commuter service. The application for this strategic rail freight site started in 2006. In December 2016—10 years after assurances were given that access would be granted—Network Rail said that it would be in a position to confirm an “efficient scheduling strategy” once the capability and capacity analysis team completed its evaluation. However, it responded only last week, and its response, which was about essential works disruption and pathing, raises far more questions than it answers.

The Government’s national policy statement on national networks in 2014 identified London and the south-east as the areas with busiest passenger services, with passenger carriage set to increase by 46.1% by 2033. Moreover, the Department for Transport’s 2016 rail freight strategy said:

“Rail freight services operate in response to customer and supply chain demands, making it more challenging to plan for freight services than passenger services, which tend to run to a regular timetable and route.”

Commuters in my constituency certainly wish passenger services would run to a regular timetable and route.

Will the Minister guarantee that the proposed strategic rail freight interchange will not add further delays and cancellations for my constituents, who are already at breaking point? Will he undertake to scrutinise any plans to deliver the site link tunnel, and will he test those plans against the potential disruption to services? I am concerned that the significant rail works necessary to deliver the site will mean a protracted period of disruption that cannot be justified by the site’s limitations. In case the Minister is not aware, the site is in a village with no motorway access. It has a life span of 30 years and is constrained from expansion, unlike the expansion forecast for passenger services. This inadequate proposal cannot be allowed to interfere with the exciting prospect of better and more frequent passenger services for my constituents.

What can be done to improve the current situation? Commuter groups such as the Train Suffragettes in St Albans have suggested changes that would go a long way towards improving the overall service that passengers receive. The first is a consistent and user-friendly refund system to allow passengers to reclaim expenditure, including taxi costs incurred because of delays and cancellations. The second is opening station ticket barriers when there have been delays, in order to ease platform congestion, which is often described as being at a dangerous level.

The third suggestion, which is vital, is to improve communication at all levels. Passengers are fed up with being in the dark when trains have been delayed or cancelled. They have suggested following the model of the London underground, where—as I am sure the Minister is aware—when a tube is held in a tunnel, the driver immediately makes an announcement to let passengers know the reason for delay and how long a wait is anticipated. When a tube station is closed, the driver will helpfully suggest alternative connecting routes for passengers.

The fourth suggestion, which is regularly raised, relates to communication between drivers and staff at stations—St Albans station in my case. Passengers need to be able to speak to station staff to find out exactly what is going on and what has caused the delay or cancellation.

Finally, passengers demand that fares be reduced, or at least frozen, until Thameslink vastly improves the service on the line. I called for the same thing in 2012, but five years later the catastrophic situation that my constituents are experiencing is exactly the same. We also face the impact of the strategic rail freight interchange’s disruptions being put into the mix. I suggest that we are on our knees in St Albans, and the Minister needs to take drastic action now.

4.40 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate; it is a welcome opportunity to raise the misery being caused to my constituents as a consequence of the failures of our rail services.

It is hard to overstate the cumulative impact of failing rail services on my constituents in Dulwich and West Norwood over the past two years. The hon. Lady mentioned the bottom three franchises for customer satisfaction

[Helen Hayes]

being Southern, Southeastern and Thameslink. Those are the only franchises that operate in my constituency, so we have, on different parts of the route, different combinations of misery. Commuting by rail from my constituency is a universally difficult and miserable experience.

The debate is focused on Thameslink passenger services, which I will return to in a moment, but it would be remiss of me to contribute to a debate on one part of the GTR franchise without putting on the record the utter misery caused to my constituents who travel on Southern Rail services, which are also run by GTR. I have heard from almost 2,000 constituents over the past 18 months about the catastrophic impact that the collapse in Southern rail services has had on their employment, family life and wellbeing.

The Government's response to Southern Rail's problems has been, frankly, too little, too late. While everyone understands that many of the problems can only be resolved through infrastructure investment, there is much more that can and should be done in the short term to provide passengers with timely information about delays and cancellations, and to re-establish effective negotiations with the trade unions to address the safety concerns that have been raised and to resolve the industrial dispute. The fact that the chief executive of GTR, who has responsibility for the Southern Rail franchise as well as Thameslink services, received a pay package of almost half a million pounds last year simply adds insult to injury for my constituents.

Thameslink services run through Tulse Hill, Herne Hill and Loughborough Junction stations in my constituency, in addition to peak-time services through Sydenham Hill and West Dulwich. Those services are vital for people who work in areas of central London, including Blackfriars, Farringdon and the City of London, or areas of intensifying employment, such as King's Cross and Old Street, or those who need to access the tube network from Elephant and Castle. I was a Thameslink commuter to Farringdon, and then to Blackfriars, for the best part of 20 years prior to being elected to Parliament.

Thameslink services have been becoming more overcrowded and less reliable for many years. Passengers who use stations in my constituency have suffered the consequences of residential densification further down the line, meaning that it is now often impossible to get a seat or even to stand comfortably on trains that were not previously so full. With the exception of Herne Hill station, which has lifts, the stations in my constituency are not accessible. Loughborough Junction is a particularly challenging station to use, with very steep steps and narrow, windswept platforms. At peak times, passengers at Loughborough Junction are often unable to board trains at all because they are so overcrowded. The Loughborough Junction area is currently subject to considerable new residential development, increasing the number of homes in the area. New homes are badly needed, but they must be supported by investment in transport infrastructure to ensure that everyone in the community can continue to get to and from work and to access the services they need.

The current services are also desperately unreliable. There are delays and cancellations every day, and my constituents are forced to organise their lives in order to

mitigate the impact of services they should be able to rely on. New rolling stock is slowly being introduced, and while to some extent those trains provide a more comfortable environment with more standing space, they are often just as overcrowded as the old ones. There is a view among many passengers that they should have been designed like Overground trains, with seating at the sides, to allow much more space for passengers who have to stand. We need 12-car trains across the network and investment to ensure that they can be accommodated at every station to maximise capacity for passengers.

I am also concerned about the potential loss of the direct service from my constituency to Luton airport. My constituents will now only be able to access that really important service by changing at Elephant and Castle, where trains are even more overcrowded. I am concerned that fewer trains will stop at Tulse Hill, Herne Hill and Loughborough Junction overall as a consequence of the timetable changes, in a situation where we need capacity to be increased, to cope with both current and future demand.

I am concerned that services currently run by Thameslink through Sydenham Hill and West Dulwich stations and not included in the current consultation may be lost if, in the Southeastern franchise renewal process, they are not considered to be sufficiently profitable. Those services are small in number but provide a vital route to work for many of my constituents. We need much more ambitious investment in rail infrastructure than is currently proposed to meet the transport needs of my constituents, as both our local population and the population further out of London on the same commuter lines continue to grow.

I have the following asks of the Minister today. The experience of the failure of the temporary timetable on the Southern network into London Bridge tells us that the robustness of the timetable in relation to the capacity of the network is a paramount consideration for reliability. When will the Minister confirm the capacity of the Thameslink core in relation to the proposed new timetable? Will he commit to exploring the reopening of Camberwell station between Loughborough Junction and Elephant and Castle stations, to provide extra capacity and a modern, fully accessible station environment to serve local residents, staff and patients travelling to King's College Hospital and students travelling to the University of the Arts London sites in Camberwell and Elephant and Castle?

Will the Minister commit to ensuring there is no drop in the number of services through Loughborough Junction, Tulse Hill and Herne Hill stations following the consultations on the new timetable? Will he commit to securing the future of services to Blackfriars from Sydenham Hill and West Dulwich? Will he commit to exploring the reopening of the eastern platforms at Loughborough Junction station, to enable trains to stop there between Denmark Hill and Elephant and Castle? That would double capacity at Loughborough Junction station. Will he commit to working with Transport for London to open an Overground station at Brixton East, between Denmark Hill and Clapham High Street stations, to relieve pressure on the Thameslink network?

Will the Minister work to persuade the Secretary of State, who has not previously been inclined to do so, to work in a cross-party way with the Mayor of London to transfer all suburban rail services in south London to

Transport for London to run, so that profits can be reinvested in the improvements we so urgently need, rather than being used to reward the poor performance of senior leaders in the private sector? Finally, can the Minister tell my constituents when they will be able to rely on rail services to run to the agreed timetable, without delays and cancellations, and when they can stop having to organise their lives around the failures of the GTR franchise, including the Southern railway?

4.47 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): May I begin by thanking you for your chairmanship, Mr Bailey? I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). I know what a doughty campaigner she has been on this topic. My remarks are only intended to echo some of the points she has made, and indeed some of the points made by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

I should begin by declaring an interest: I commute, for my sins, on this line every day, so I have first-hand experience of it, but also a desire to improve it, as do many of my constituents. Literally thousands of my constituents commute every day from Radlett and Elstree and Borehamwood on that line into central London. They, like other hon. Members' constituents, have sorry tales to tell of the poor performance of the line.

I will give a few statistics. At times last year, less than two thirds of Thameslink trains ran on time. Almost one in five trains were cancelled or significantly late. The level of frustration and volume of correspondence that I received in relation to that poor performance led me eventually to compile a dossier of more than 100 complaints from constituents, which I was able to present to the Transport Secretary. They were very similar to the complaints outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans. The most distressing cases were those of people who felt they had to give up their jobs because they could not rely on the service, and of younger mums and dads struggling with childcare. We know what it is like with childcare—we think we are going to pick our kids up at a certain time, so we allow, say, an hour for the train journey, but it takes two hours. The nursery is closing, and the level of stress involved if family or friends cannot pick our children up is enormous.

Commuters in my constituency are seeking a number of reassurances. I know that many of these do not fall within the direct purview of the Minister—they fall within the purview of the franchisee—but I hope he will be able to bring some pressure to bear on the franchisee in relation to them. Specific points that constituents have asked me to raise include the problem of trains switching at the last minute. I have seen that: people get on a train thinking it is an all-stopper or a semi-fast train, and literally moments before it is about to depart, they suddenly discover that it is either not going to stop where they thought or stopping at every stop. Communicating that effectively to commuters is very important. My hon. Friend drew the comparison with London Underground. Thameslink has been improving a little in this respect, but there is still a lot more it could do to keep passengers up to date with what is going on as it happens. If people know what is happening, it makes things that bit easier. Even if it just involves sending someone a text to say they will be late, it makes it a little easier.

There is also tremendous variability in the length of trains. There can be a full platform waiting for an eight-car train and suddenly there is a four-car train that not everybody can get on. A perennial bugbear for my constituents—although I admit it probably runs contrary to the interests of my hon. Friend's constituents—is that too few trains stop at Elstree and Borehamwood and Radlett, instead running directly to St Albans. When there are delays on the line, my constituents are just looking to get home, and in those circumstances they would look for trains stopping every time. I would be grateful for an update on anything the Minister can do to raise the pressure on that.

There is also a broader question about the infrastructure. A great number of my constituents drive to and park at the station. In both Elstree and Borehamwood and Radlett there are single-tier carparks. I simply do not understand why another level or two cannot be put on those carparks. Given the incredibly high parking fees charged by Thameslink, it would be in its interests to construct other levels. I am interested in the Minister's perspective on that. As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, as the level of densification in these areas of the south-east inevitably continues to rise, the demand for the station will only continue to grow. Equally, there is the issue of capacity at the station. I am grateful for the Government's progress on Borehamwood station—they have announced some additional funding, which is very gratefully received—but that money needs to continue to flow so that we can keep up with the ever-rising demand.

I echo the concerns about the pricing of the railway line. By many measures, this is the most expensive railway line per kilometre travelled not only in the United Kingdom but in the whole of Europe. If passengers are being forced to pay that much, the service really does need to improve to match it. I know that anything the Minister can do to keep pressure on the company to find further efficiency savings to keep the cost of commuting down would be very gratefully received by constituents.

It is also important to look at what happens when things go wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans alluded to, the compensation scheme is still not simple and transparent enough, and does not cover a lot of the on-costs. For example, if the line is down, my constituents living in Radlett or Borehamwood often have no alternative than to go to the very end of the Jubilee line and then take a taxi from Stanmore. That is in no way covered in the compensation scheme. It is a completely unavoidable cost for my constituents, and that should be considered.

It is also important to look not just at the franchisee but at Network Rail. Too often, we concentrate on the failures of the franchisee, not those of Network Rail. It is to the Government's great credit that when faced with a dire financial situation in 2010 they decided not to cut back on railway investment. They kept the investment going for Crossrail and for the rather unfortunately named Thameslink 2000 programme. We are hopeful that Thameslink 2000 will be delivered by 2020, but that process has necessitated considerable upgrades at London Bridge. That was clearly necessary, but it has had a bad knock-on effect on commuter services, because capacity has been significantly reduced around the station. I would be grateful for an update from the Minister about

[*Oliver Dowden*]

progress on that upgrade. When can we expect London Bridge to be completed, and when can we expect trains to start fully running through there?

An issue has been flagged to me that I would be grateful if the Minister took very seriously. Capacity in the London core of Thameslink will be effectively doubled overnight when trains go up the northern stretch—on which my hon. Friend's and my stations lie—not just towards Bedford, but to Hitchin and Harpenden. That will mean huge pressure through the central core. At times, there could be trains every minute or two minutes. I know the system will be computerised, but I would be grateful if departmental officials stress-tested the system before roll-out so that we do not face a cliff edge. After all the pain, the moment the system at St Pancras is not working—my hon. Friend alluded to this—we would not want to go back to square one again and have a complete failure of the service.

I would be grateful if the Minister updated me on plans to integrate between franchisees and Network Rail, as announced by the Secretary of State. That is important. One of the problems of privatisation was the artificial distinction, and it is important that we close that distinction. An update would help us understand how that can be addressed in the longer run.

Let me quickly turn to two final issues. There is a desperate need for the Oyster card system to be extended to Radlett. I know the Minister is on the case, but an assurance from him to my constituents that that will be delivered by 2018 would be gratefully received—and the same goes for Potters Bar, which is not on Thameslink but is served by Govia Thameslink, the wider holding company.

We cannot discuss rail freight without looking at the rail freight terminal: the disastrous development that is entirely unsuited to our part of Hertfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and I continue to campaign against it, but if it is to go ahead, we must look at its impact on the railway line. At the meeting we both had with Network Rail, it updated us that the development will involve putting a line under the existing line to access the rail freight terminal. When we think about the infrastructure involved in building one railway line under another, it is difficult to conceive that that will not involve significant delays. I would be grateful for an update on that and, in particular, an assurance that the full cost will rightly be borne by the developer, and that means minimising disruption to passengers, even if that means a higher development cost. Given all that we have heard, it is simply not fair for commuters to bear the cost in terms of delayed journeys for the developer to get a cheaper deal.

Equally, I would be grateful for some reassurance on timetabling. I know Network Rail's argument is that there are already allocated slots, but those slots are not being used by freight trains at the moment. I fear we will lose capacity once they are being used continuously by the rail freight terminal. Some reassurances would be gratefully received.

I thank the Minister for coming here. I was on the radio just now talking about this, and the interviewer said, “This is the last day of term. You will all be watching videos, relaxing.” I trust that the Minister will completely disprove that and demonstrate that he will address this issue with vigour.

4.58 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, in this crucial debate. We have seen the passion presented by all hon. Members on the challenges that their constituents face not just day by day, but week by week, month by month and year by year. The sheer dissatisfaction, frustration and misery that commuters have had to put up with for such a long time shows that resolution is crucial. The passenger must be listened to. We have obviously heard about the disruption brought not only to the commute, but to family life. I give all credit to parents who try to arrange childcare under the best of circumstances, but when they face an unreliable train service as well, the pressures are immense. All hon. Members have articulated that well this afternoon.

When passengers turn into activists and take action against what should be a normal part of their routine and daily life—such as the Train Suffragettes and others I know as well—it really shows that the whole rail system is in meltdown and has to be addressed. As we have heard, it is not just about train operating companies, because this has been a sustained problem across the network for such a long time. However, Thameslink particularly stands out. It has the second-lowest level of passenger satisfaction, at 73%—only Southern, at 65%, is behind—and has issues with punctuality and reliability, as we have heard. Southeastern trains are also not delivering for passengers, which is now spreading to Northern as well. With regard to Thameslink, things have not improved for several years now. When a staggering 23% are satisfied with how the company has dealt with delays, it really shows that it is left wanting, as has the whole situation.

What we have really picked up on today are the consequences of that unreliability, the infrastructure problems, the desperate need for investment and the massive overcrowding issues. The overcapacity issue will not go away, as more housing developments will put further strain on the network. We have also heard about challenges with the choice of destination, the obvious need for improvements right across the network and the impact that late or cancelled trains have on commuters.

It is important that we listen to these real frustrations. We cannot allow the situation to continue in which the Government point fingers but do not lift one to sort out what is happening. We know that there is real chaos in the way the franchise was set up, as was rightly highlighted when the Gibb report was debated in the main Chamber on 4 July. We know that there needs to be effective governance over the whole structure, which has been lacking, to ensure that issues are addressed expediently and that proper dispute resolution mechanisms are put in also. At the forefront of everything, we need to make sure that passengers' concerns are addressed and that their safety is safeguarded. We also heard about access needs, and the fact that some train journeys are simply impossible for passengers with disabilities.

Another point that was rightly raised was the financial cost to passengers. We have seen rail prices go up by 27% since 2010 on this rail network, which is the most expensive not only in the UK but in the whole of Europe, meaning that passengers are having to pick up the cost of this failed network. We are expecting further price increases in August, and we have heard the figure

of 4%—perhaps the Minister can enlighten us on that. We need certainty on pricing; all passengers, whether on Thameslink or other networks, really want to know what is happening on pricing. The Opposition believe that price rises should be capped in line with the consumer prices index. We have heard different answers from different Ministers from the Department: we have heard that price rises will continue to be capped in line with the retail prices index; we have heard twice from the Minister that pricing is under review; and we have also heard that things will be kept as they are this year—but that does not say what will happen next year. Passengers need clarity on pricing.

We need to make sure that we move forward with smart ticketing, which we heard several contributions on. Where are we at with part-time smart ticketing, which will impact on many of those parents? It is an equality issue and we need to move forward on it. We also need to make sure that we see greater flexibility in smart ticketing, including the extension of the Oyster card. With the technology that is in place, how is delay repay being rolled out on the Oyster card? There are opportunities there. Of the amount of money that the network gains, only a minimal amount reaches the customer. The process of trying to reclaim after a delay is difficult.

Mrs Main: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Many of my passengers say that they do not want to have to claim; they simply want the service they have paid for. Delay repay is better, but on the other hand the service needs to improve, because otherwise they just get money back for a bad service. That is not what they want; they want the journey they were guaranteed.

Rachael Maskell: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. However, we also need to ensure that, where there has been a delay, passengers are properly compensated, given that they have paid so much for the privilege of travelling on that network. Between 2010 and 2015, the train operating company generated £575 million from Network Rail for infrastructure delays, yet only £73 million went to passengers, so we have to question who benefits. Again, it comes back to governance over the system, which is poor. That comes up many times. It is a theme that is repeated in every aspect of how the franchise works. The franchise has failed passengers. We need to see delay repay extended so that the customer can be compensated automatically, as opposed to trying to seek out that compensation.

We also need to look at what has happened with the Thameslink programme. It was first put in place in 2006, so those years are moving forward. We need to see that the objectives now being met are not at the inconvenience of passengers—such as major track work, signalling and station remodelling, improvements to the lines approaching London Bridge and the overhead lines north of St Pancras. The programme was very ambitious, but without proper governance it has not been realised. On the issue of capacity, as 24 trains an hour move through the core of central London, the risks increase. We cannot even get the service moving right at the moment. We need to hear from the Minister what mitigation is being put in place to reduce risk and ensure that trains run on time and that passengers reach their destinations on time. About 14,500 additional passengers will use that network.

The Gibb report goes further on the issues that need to be addressed across the networks. It also addresses GTR's responsibilities and Network Rail. The issues it identified include rail renewal, switching and sleeper renewal. The list goes on to talk about telecoms and cable signalling and dealing with things such as vegetation, earthworks and fencing—it is comprehensive. We need to ensure that the improvement programme is put in place and delivered by 2018. We do not want the stop-start approach to maintenance and development. We want to see the investment running into the CP6 funding round from 2019. What exactly is the Minister doing to make sure there is ongoing investment in the railway?

We must thank Chris Gibb for his report, but we must also note the responsibility to move forward on many of the problems experienced across the Thameslink network. We also need to address the issues raised by the Transport Select Committee, which has identified how poorly the franchise has been established. The relationships do not work between the train operator, Network Rail and the passenger. That must be put right. Changing an operator does not change the environment, which is so important. It is right that the Committee highlighted the problems with the initial structuring of the franchise, the inadequate planning that was put in place, weaknesses in the franchising handover period, infrastructure and rolling stock failures, mismanagement, and poor industrial relations.

I want to talk about industrial relations, because it is so important that these issues are addressed. We have people working on the rail network who are seriously concerned about passenger safety and access. We have heard about the overcrowding, which increases risk, and the real challenges on the network. More commuters will be using the line and it is vital that public safety comes first. The unions have been clear that this is not a dispute about money; their concern is about public safety.

I have spoken to train drivers in the last couple of days, and they say it is vital that they have a second pair of eyes. If they miss something, the other person can help pick it up. They say it is vital that there is someone there to deal with incidents, whatever they may be, because it is unpredictable. It could be a driver falling ill, a fatality on the rails, a terrorist attack, derailment or a crash, women's safety at night or antisocial behaviour disturbing other customers. Of course, guards play a much wider role in maximising revenue collection and providing passengers with a wider service. We have heard today how important that service is, particularly with the line of communication, which a number of hon. Members have mentioned. They can let passengers know information, be the first port of call and be the passengers' champion when needed.

I urge the Minister to address those vital issues. We must get the rostering right to ensure that the trains run on time and address the issues in this dispute. This is not rocket science; the dispute is simple to resolve. I know, as a negotiator, that the Minister just needs to sit down and make sure the guards are in place and can continue with their role. It is incumbent on him to sort this out. I know it is not beyond his wit, and I trust he will do so.

In conclusion, we have heard about the painful experiences of commuters. We must remember that the whole rail network is there as a service—a public service—to help passengers continue with their employment

[Rachael Maskell]

opportunities and their daily lives. It is absolutely right that focus is now brought on the way the franchises and relationships are not operating and that that is worked through, to bring the service back to customers. That is why the Labour party believes that public services now need to be a public accountability, in public ownership. For far too long, decisions have been made away from the passenger. We want to see the passenger at the heart of those decisions, putting safety and service needs at the forefront and building the structures around the passenger.

I have heard all the frustrations, and Labour will take those on board and work with passengers to make sure that we can provide the service needed in the future. We will keep the pressure on the Government, as the passengers' voice throughout this process.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate and presenting her case, as she always does, with great vigour and force; I expect no less from her. She is right to hold Ministers to account for the service on her railway.

Passengers expect a timely, punctual and reliable service, and when they do not get it, they are right to want to understand why, and what Ministers and the train operators intend to do about it. This has been a helpful debate on what is occurring with Thameslink, and I am grateful to both the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) for their contributions. There was also a sensible contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). We may not agree on the final paragraphs of her speech, but I thought that much of what she said made great sense.

I am aware of how important it is that we deal with this issue. As I said, passengers want a service that they can rely upon, and if they cannot, that should be a concern for us all. The Thameslink service is vital for our country, not least because our capital city depends upon it. Reliability of services through central London is critical. It is one of Europe's busiest rail routes, so it is right that passengers will see new stations—and better stations, in fact—new trains, new infrastructure and new systems to increase capacity, reduce crowding and provide better connections for passengers across London and the wider south-east.

A number of points have been made in the debate, but I want to focus first and foremost on answering the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans. I often find that these one-hour debates are neither fish nor fowl, and I want to give proper attention to the points made by the Member who secured the debate without ignoring the other points made. Normally I run out of time in that ambition, so if I do not manage to respond to all the points now, I ask Members to make sure that I reply to them all subsequently.

The first point made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans was about the impact of the new trains. Of course, people want new trains. It is right to point

out that the new Thameslink trains have advanced technology; they are more spacious and modern by their very definition. We have contracted Siemens to deliver 115 of them overall. We have 37 currently in service, between Bedford and Brighton, on the Wimbledon loop and on services in Kent. We expect all Thameslink services to be served by Class 700 trains by October 2017.

Train performance on the brand-new trains is improving bit by bit every period, but I recognise that it has not been good enough. I have spoken to Siemens myself to urge improvement. I know that it is working very closely with GTR. With every software improvement we see a significant improvement, but it is worth bearing it in mind that this platform is a step beyond what Siemens has produced before with its Desiro platform. There will always be slightly more challenges with such a new piece of rolling stock, but we are seeing significant improvement over time, and I fully expect to see significant improvement in reliability over the coming weeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans gave a number of examples of where her constituents were not getting the service they desire. I have been hearing those tales about this GTR network since I started in this role last July, and that is what has inspired me to focus on trying to deliver the rail ombudsman that we had in our manifesto as rapidly as I can. That is making good progress. I want to ensure that passengers can get binding arbitration at the end of the day where they cannot secure the right outcome from their appeals. We do not want these situations to occur—far from it—but where they do, I want the passenger to feel empowered. That is why I wanted to ensure that we had passenger representation on the Gibb report panel, for example—to ensure that their voice was being heard.

I was fascinated to hear about the Train Suffragettes to whom my hon. Friend referred. I would be delighted if she could send me more of their ideas about how the service could be improved, and I would be happy to take on board as many of them as possible.

Oliver Dowden: I should also highlight Thamestink, which is the campaign group in my constituency. I would be grateful if the Minister could extend the invitation to that group as well.

Paul Maynard: I always risk creating extra work for my private office in inviting all submissions, wherever they are from, but I am more than happy to receive them and give them my full attention.

A number of hon. Members mentioned what is referred to in the industry as passenger information during disruption. It has been a major concern of mine that passengers may, at the breakfast table, consult their mobile phone, get one piece of information that their train is running, beetle down to the station to get the train and then discover that for some reason it has been cancelled. There are too many sources of information across the industry. The Office of Rail and Road has two key obligations under law. One is improving passenger information during disruption. I have asked it to look closely at how that is working across the south-east quadrant as a whole, because I have concerns about both GTR and Southeastern ensuring that we have consistent information. I accept that that is a key point, and it is one that I am taking up.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans has raised concerns both with me and with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about the Radlett freight interchange. Those representations were augmented today by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden). I genuinely recognise those concerns; that is why I want to ensure that the timetable is protected from the impact of the works. Network Rail has reassured my Department, just as it has reassured both my hon. Friends, that the work at Park Street has been planned to have minimum impact on passengers, as freight trains will run only outside peak times and overnight, but I recognise that the concerns remain and that there is a wish to have greater oversight of the detail of what is being planned. I suspect the best thing I can offer is to broker a meeting with Network Rail, with me present as well, and perhaps we can test some of those assumptions against what my officials and the Department are also aware of. That might be of assistance to my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans, so we will co-operate as best we can to try to find that reassurance.

My hon. Friend also mentioned overcrowding at St Albans station. We are extending the platform to accommodate 12-carriage trains as part of the Thameslink programme. GTR is working to deliver extended automatic ticket gates at platform 4, which I believe is called the Ridgmont entrance, by 2019. The main station building will also receive an enhanced retail offering, a larger concourse area to accommodate peak periods and associated platform furniture and shelter facilities to improve the station environment. I recognise that there remain capacity concerns at St Albans station. We are thinking through the implications of that for future rail control periods.

In terms of future Thameslink services and how they will benefit St Albans, it is a matter of improved peak frequency and more capacity between central London, St Albans and Bedford, with more peak services, new cross-London routes, and Thameslink services reinstated to serve London Bridge. I expect passengers to see more comfort benefits, with more than 3,000 standard-class seats into London St Pancras, which is 15% extra from today, particularly through using the 12-carriage trains.

Essentially, Thameslink is all about expanding capacity on a key commuter route. We are trying to deliver the trains and the infrastructure to enable that, with 24 trains an hour in the peak through the Thameslink core between Blackfriars and St Pancras, which is an additional nine trains in each direction.

Part of our focus is on making sure that we have the right infrastructure—not just track but signalling. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere is right to identify that we need to make sure that signalling and timetabling are robust. We have a planning board, chaired by Chris Gibb, of Gibb report fame, and an assurance panel, chaired by another industry expert, Chris Green, double-checking the work that is going on to make sure it is reliable and will deliver the outputs that we seek.

To date, the Thameslink programme has delivered a new Blackfriars station connecting both sides of the Thames. We have seen major enhancements at Farringdon, platform extensions on midland main line stations to allow longer trains and, as I said, 37 of the new class 700 trains. There are new maintenance depots at Three Bridges in Crawley and Hornsey in north London, and

many hon. Members will be familiar with the new London Bridge station, two thirds of the concourse of which has been open since August 2016.

What else can passengers expect? The rest of London Bridge station will be open for business in early 2018. The new class 700 trains will start operating on Great Northern routes and on services in Kent and Sussex. Entire new journeys, such as Cambridge to Gatwick, will open up new journey options and connections for customers, including an interchange with the Elizabeth line services at Farringdon, which I think will transform how people approach travel options within London. Most importantly, from 2018 there will be services every two to three minutes through the central London core between Blackfriars and St Pancras International.

I recognise concerns about performance. We have seen performance steadily improving since the start of the year. When we are able to focus on improving the network, rather than just on industrial relations, we can deliver a real improvement in performance, working together with the drivers. The jump in public performance from 62% last December to a high of 85% this year reinforces that point, but I recognise that we need to do better—85% is still not good enough. We continue to have an immense amount of pressure on the network.

We are also looking carefully at the future Thameslink timetable. Journeys will be improved with better travel across the network, but modern track will make journeys more reliable and new trains will provide additional capacity. GTR has been actively seeking feedback from any interested parties on the timetable changes to make sure that they best match passenger need. The second stage of the consultation has just closed and we are looking carefully at what people are saying.

As I mentioned earlier, our Thameslink industry readiness board, chaired by Chris Gibb, is doing important work. Thameslink brings many other franchises on to its network, and the board is looking at making sure we maximise the potential for all aspects of the train network.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans mentioned delay repay, as did the shadow Minister. We have brought “delay repay 15” specifically into GTR as the first franchise to trial it, because we recognise the impact that the disturbances across the network as a whole have had. I share the concern that we need to explain more carefully that the impact of Thameslink is not just felt south of London. It is often hard to envisage how Thameslink is a regional service. What occurs north of London has an impact south of London and vice versa. It is worth highlighting, for example, that right-time presentation, as we call it—in other words, the right-time arrival of the train at the station—is rarely higher than 50% on services from the north of London going south through to Brighton. That indicates that problems in Brighton on trains going northwards also impact on punctuality and reliability, so investment in both sides of the central core is absolutely crucial.

We have improved delay repay, although I take on board the point about improving its delivery. We have to be careful about our terminology, as I have learned. Automated compensation is about improving the behind-the-scenes progress of individual train operating companies. It is about someone getting their compensation without doing anything to achieve it. That requires them to demonstrate that they have been on the train in question. They can either nominate their usual commuter train,

[Paul Maynard]

in which case it can be automatic compensation, or, where they have not specified a train, they must prove that they were on the delayed train. There is sadly a risk of fraud, and we are talking about considerable sums of money from regular commuters, so there has to be that element of assurance.

I share the ambition of the hon. Member for York Central, which is why I have been pushing for delay repay to be rolled out as much as possible. Passengers have a right to expect it. We need to be much better at making people aware of it and confident about using it. I would rather, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans said, that there were no delays at all; then we would have a better service in the first place.

As I often mention, there is a £300 million investment in improvement across the Thameslink network. Not all of that is occurring south of London. Hon. Members may think this an issue just on the Brighton main line, but it is not. We are investing in additional land sheriff shifts to reduce trespass and railway crime across the entire length of the line, and there will be more use of predict and prevent condition-monitoring software and processes on the infrastructure. There will be additional incident response teams and embankment works at New Barnet. All of that is occurring north of London on the stretch that covers St Albans. Because of the point I made earlier about interaction, service delays, either north or south, inevitably have an impact on St Albans at some point.

We will continue to deliver that £300 million until December 2018, when we cease the current control period. We will need to invest further in control period 6, and we will be making future announcements about how that spending will be allocated. We are committed to doing what is needed to bring this stretch of track up to the standards required to deliver timely and punctual rail services.

I will try to make a bit of progress, because I recognise that I have not covered any of the points made by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. I am not sure whether the shadow Minister had time to be briefed on this before she arrived here, but there will be talks tomorrow at the Department involving GTR, ASLEF and, I think, the RMT—I am not sure whether that is precisely correct. Hopefully, that will be an opportunity to have the discussion the hon. Lady is aiming for.

I do not think anyone disagrees that having a second person on board is a bad thing. We have been able to have a second person on board across the network

where GTR is in operation. That is a good thing in my view. The issue will be the circumstances in which a train may depart if someone is not available. That is the narrow point that was in dispute in the past, and perhaps tomorrow will be the chance to resolve that—we will have to wait and see.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood made a number of perfectly relevant suggestions. I am not sure I can do them justice in two minutes, but if it would be helpful to her I would like her to come to see me and my officials to go through them in more detail. I am aware of schemes such as the expansion of Loughborough Junction and Camberwell, and she deserves a better response than me saying, “We will look at it.” If she gets in touch, I will be more than happy to meet her. I know the Secretary of State met the Mayor yesterday and had constructive discussions.

On the hon. Lady’s point about resilience, we are already seeing greater resilience through a re-diagramming of services. Part of the problem is drivers joining and leaving a service as it passes through the GTR network. By simplifying the diagrams with the agreement of the drivers, we can make for a more resilient service by ensuring that that interruption is reduced.

I noted the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere. We should not overlook the fact that GTR was criticised in the Gibb report—as was the Department. We saw penalties imposed on GTR last week, which will go towards improving the network. This is not just about trade unions, GTR or the Department; it is about an entire ecosystem, as some have pointed out. I heard my hon. Friend’s point about car parking, and I know the rail delivery group is looking at that. The passenger’s experience begins when they decide to make a journey, and that includes car parking.

Vertical integration is moving according to plan. We have already seen some of the benefits for this franchise of getting Network Rail and GTR to work more closely together and of continuing to work with TfL on the Oyster zone, which should help my hon. Friend’s constituents in particular. One highlight of the last week was the rail delivery group’s announcement of new statistics on right-time arrivals at stations, which I urge all hon. Members to have a look at.

If there is anything I have missed, I ask Members to get in touch. We will keep Members informed—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 July 2017

[MR NIGEL EVANS in the Chair]

Jobcentres and the DWP Estate

1.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered job centres and the Department for Work and Pensions estate.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. This is a very serious issue, and I will be unashamedly referring to the effects that the jobcentre closures will have on claimants in every single constituency in the city of Glasgow, but before I do, I will make some general remarks.

The closures are, of course, part of a wider Government strategy to review their property estate, but it is my contention that very little strategic thinking is being done centrally. Government Departments' offices are closing in towns and cities, with potential job losses, alongside the closure of jobcentres in the same towns and cities across the United Kingdom. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us if one Department is considering office closures across all Government Departments, and whether there is a strategic overview.

I hope the Minister will finally admit not only that the starting point of this process was the 2015 spending review, which identified a 20% cut in the Department for Work and Pensions estate, but that that target also decided the endgame, as everything since has been an exercise in delivering those savings no matter what. It has been a question of identifying an outcome and working back from that, with a fig leaf of consultation and a token change not by closing six jobcentres across the UK, but by pushing ahead with halving the number of jobcentres in Glasgow, with the solitary exception of Castlemilk jobcentre. As we all know, Castlemilk is noted for its excellent transport links—not! Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), I acknowledge the reprieve but condemn the closure of Langside, which is a resource close to a major further education college. Talk about an opportunity lost for positive outcomes.

The suggestion that the closures will usher in an improved service, with fewer public access points combined with swingeing back-office cuts, is an insult to our intelligence. Ministers have had to admit that they expect at least 750 DWP staff to lose their jobs and have refused to rule out compulsory redundancies, although I invite the Minister to do so today. The knock-on effect on vulnerable users and the wider community through the cumulative effect of closures hitting local economies and businesses is hard to quantify, but one thing we can be sure of is that the Government have made no assessment of the impact of these cuts.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am so sorry to hear of the impact that these closures will have in his

constituency. In my constituency, the jobcentre in Broxburn is going to close. The constituency has already faced significant economic challenges, with the closure of Hall's, and people now have to travel more than six miles to the jobcentre. Does he agree that a global view of communities that have had such losses is vital in this process?

Chris Stephens: I do agree. The Government really have to publish a map of office closures in every single UK Government Department. Not only has my hon. Friend's constituency seen the closure of Hall's, but Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs wants to close its office in Livingston, while jobcentres are being closed in the very same constituency. That really does not add up.

This is a calculated, savings-driven, back-of-an-envelope, callous exercise in studied avoidance of the real issues at stake. The scale of job losses is severe because it is cumulative, coming as it does after years of erosion of DWP staff numbers. I note the careful use of semantics when any Minister replies to questions; they talk about no loss of frontline staff. However, the cuts programme includes large-scale back-office closures, with no clear commitment to no job losses, and as those of us with trade union experience know fine well, big budget savings are made on salaries rather than bricks and mortar, and not renewing a lease does not realise the savings that not paying wages and underwriting pensions does.

Before the Minister repeats the mantra that we have heard and memorised about Glasgow having the most jobcentres per head of population, may I strongly suggest there is a reason for that? It is not a numbers game. It is because historically and currently, Glasgow has the highest levels of deprivation in the country. The highest proportion of indices of multiple deprivation data zones in Scotland are in the city. We are talking about intergenerational poverty, rooted in the Scottish Office plan to encourage skilled workers to leave the city in the 1960s, followed by the systematic and planned destruction of the industrial base of Scotland in the 1980s. That was combined with the explicitly political reorganisation of local government in 1996, which abolished Strathclyde region, so that the ability to fund social work and education services by a broader tax base was destroyed. We remember how the Tories have dealt with Glasgow over the years, and we now see once again how they wilfully fail to recognise the scale of deprivation and poverty that people in our communities struggle with daily.

Carntyne West and Haghill data zone, ranked No. 2 in the list of the most deprived areas in Scotland, is currently within walking distance—if you are healthy—of Parkhead jobcentre. North Barlanark and Easterhouse South, ranked No. 3, is just about within walking distance of Easterhouse jobcentre. Both are marked for closure. If we take the time to look at the location of the most deprived communities in Glasgow, which has the highest percentage of deprivation in Scotland, and then overlay the map of closures, a bleak picture emerges. The people who are the furthest from being job-ready and require intensive support are now being pushed even further to the margins. The notion that they can and will use online services instead can only come from those who have no grasp of the realities of lives where women struggle to afford sanitary products, never mind broadband and tablets. Is this digital by default, or exclusion by design?

[*Chris Stephens*]

The Scottish index of multiple deprivation indicators identifies the 10 most employment-deprived zones in Scotland. With Possilpark ranked fourth and Wyndford ranked eighth, the closure of Maryhill jobcentre will do little to alter those statistics. Possilpark tops the list of zones with the poorest health indicators, and with the recent publicity surrounding a claimant who was forced to get out of her wheelchair and crawl up the steps of the building where her assessment was taking place, we can only wonder what levels of indignity will follow from these closures.

To know Glasgow's geography and transport links is to understand the problems people will experience in the communities with the highest levels of deprivation and the poorest transport links. Glasgow is like a wheel, with the circular subway and linear spokes of bus routes radiating from the city centre, but not across communities. The east, north and north-east of the city, where the majority of closures are planned, are not well served by public transport. The 2014 report commissioned by Glasgow City Council on in-work poverty, "Hard Work, Hard Times", identified transport as a major barrier to finding and sustaining work. In the consultation response on some of Glasgow's jobcentres, a staggering 92% of respondents expressed concerns about the increase in travel time to attend the new jobcentres, and 79% expressed concern about the potential increase in travel costs.

It is clear that the industrial level of denial about the impact of these closures is accompanied by an expectation that other agencies will pick up the pieces and that, as per usual, local councils and third sector bodies such as citizens advice bureaux will carry the burden of mitigating these cuts. At Scottish questions yesterday, in answer to pointed questions about jobcentre closures, there was a glancing reference to "new outreach facilities"—provided and funded by whom, exactly?

Not only in Glasgow, but across Scotland and the UK, the way this cuts exercise has been conducted is riding roughshod over any partnership approach. Local community planning partnerships heard about the closures via the media, when many have been trying to address employment issues as a key outcome in their plans. Jobcentre Plus has been described as a claimant employment service rather than a public service, as those not claiming benefits do not receive support, and that is writ large in the way DWP and HMRC closures have been announced—I am not going to say "planned", because that would imply a holistic approach with a strategic overview of the estate, rather than an incoherent, budget-driven approach.

People are rightly concerned and angry about the closures, and with the roll-out of the fiasco that is universal credit, we can only conclude that unacceptable burdens are about to fall on the people who are most vulnerable, furthest from the job market and least digitally connected, and that despite the best efforts of local councils, the third sector and local elected Members and their staff, real suffering will follow as people are sanctioned for not attending a jobcentre miles away because a costly, complicated journey has replaced the access to support that they once had.

I look forward to other hon. Members explaining how the closures will affect their constituents and, of course, to the Minister's reply.

1.40 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill)

(Lab): It is an important statement that I want to make on the DWP estate, because although we have always spoken about jobcentre closures in Glasgow and the surrounding areas, when I recently took up the role of MP for my area, I suddenly found out that 250 jobs had been earmarked to go from the DWP estate. Those jobs are concentrated in the Coatbridge area. They are also flexible jobs that enable working people to have a family life and save childcare money and other costs. With those 250 jobs, there are no compulsory redundancies; there are no redundancies, but the Government want to move them off the estate. They are splitting the workforce into three parts, with two parts going to Motherwell and one part to Glasgow, but people are being given only three years' bus fare money when it should be five years' bus fare money.

Leaving all that aside, the biggest problem I have is that the Government are taking away 250 local government jobs that help our community. They mean that £4,000 a week on average is spent in the community. If you need the receipts, Mr Evans, I have them, because I asked the staff to do this exercise for me. As I said, on average £4,000 is spent in our community, so not only will 250 jobs be taken out of Coatbridge; there will also be an impact on our high street, which is already run-down. Small businesses will be affected, and there will be additional job losses.

In conclusion, I would like to know why the jobs are leaving Coatbridge. There is no need for compulsory redundancies and no need for the jobs to move. All we will be left with is another empty building and more empty shops.

1.42 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):

God must be smiling on us given that you, Mr Evans, are in the Chair for another debate on Glasgow jobcentres. Just before the House rose at Christmas time, I think we had the last Westminster Hall debate then as well. I can see a pattern forming, but I am sure you are not at the centre of it.

I want to pick up on what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, and I congratulate him most sincerely on securing the debate. I will begin with the Castlemilk jobcentre, which the Minister wished to close. I am very thankful that he has now removed that jobcentre from his list of closures. When anyone picks a fight with Castlemilk, Castlemilk fights back, and it has a tendency to win. Let that be a lesson to the Government for future battles. That did not happen by accident; it happened because a community was united in fighting off a vicious attack on it. People came together from every part of the G45 postcode to fight the cut, and in the end they won.

I pay particular tribute to one constituent. Many people were involved, but they will forgive me for singling out one—my constituent Jean Devlin, who was like a terrier. When I was down here in Westminster, picking fights on their behalf, she was running off photocopies of petitions and standing outside the jobcentre, catching every passing person and every person going in and out, along with various other people, so I pay tribute to the role that she has played in the campaign.

However, I am left with some regret, because the Minister still wishes to close the Langside jobcentre. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West mentioned, it is not just near a college, but across the road from it. You could probably throw a golf ball and hit the college if you were to stand at the door—not that I would ever suggest that you would do such a thing, Mr Evans. The jobcentre serves the second most densely populated council ward in Scotland. There is a clear need for a jobcentre in a place such as Langside.

The third jobcentre, which was supposed to absorb all the closures, is the Newlands jobcentre. I still do not understand why it is called the Newlands jobcentre—it is actually in Pollokshaws, which is further away again. That jobcentre was supposed to absorb all the cuts that the Government were going to make elsewhere. I will have a particular focus on how they plan for that to happen.

I wish to press the Minister on one thing. I will be charitable—he knows I am a charitable man—and say that perhaps he could not answer the question that I asked him yesterday because of time constraints. I suspect that that will not be an issue this afternoon. He intends to close a multitude of jobcentres across the city of Glasgow. That slack has to be picked up by somebody, because anybody who has been to Glasgow knows that it will be very difficult for the remaining jobcentres to pick up the slack. I think I am still right in saying that to this day, no Minister has even bothered to visit one jobcentre in Glasgow that the Government wish to close. If the remaining jobcentres cannot pick up the slack, who will?

I have had discussions with Susan Aitken, who is the new Scottish National party leader of Glasgow City Council and a councillor for Langside, the ward that hosts the jobcentre that the Minister still wishes to close. The council is extremely concerned. I do not say that to be party political: councillors across the chamber in Glasgow are concerned that the work will be left to the Prince's Trust, the Scottish Association for Mental Health, Jobs & Business Glasgow and various other council and third sector organisations. Where will the money come from? I want to know about the discussions that the Minister has had, or will be having between now and when the House comes back after the summer recess, with the leader of Glasgow City Council, Jobs & Business Glasgow, SAMH and the Prince's Trust in Glasgow, to find out what support he can give them in transition and in money, because supporting people, particularly vulnerable people, into work costs money, and it is money that should be well spent.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): This is a very important debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a substantial proportion of the people who work in these centres have alternative working patterns to facilitate childcare and other things? In this cry for objective evidence for the closures, I wonder whether the Minister can disclose whether that was addressed. I am talking about how the individual members of staff with alternative working patterns will be affected by the closures.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point, which has been adumbrated by other colleagues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West and the former Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West,

Margaret Ferrier, who was also like a terrier in this campaign. We rightly pay tribute to the work that she did to save jobcentres in her constituency.

This has been the most cack-handed project I have seen since I became a Member of the House. Given all that has happened, and given all that you and I have observed, Mr Evans, that is quite a statement to make. The information was leaked to the press. Members of Parliament were finding out through social media. We had to drag the Government kicking and screaming to have a consultation. They say that they have met their legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010, but they have still never bothered to publish an equality impact assessment, and I plead with the Minister to do so.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On the lack of an equality impact assessment, more than a quarter of the jobcentres that are set to close are in London, and we know that a significant number of black and Asian and disabled people will potentially be disproportionately impacted by the choice to close jobcentres, so can the Minister please confirm when a full equality impact assessment will be carried out? Is the lack of one due to the fact that, as we know, the closures will have a disproportionate impact on those protected groups?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Lady makes an extremely important point. While the scale in London will obviously be bigger, we face the exact same issues in Glasgow in terms of who will be disproportionately affected by the cuts. I plead with the Minister to publish the equality impact assessment, because I would hate to see the Government taken to court over it, and frankly that is where things are headed.

The Minister can pull this back. He needs to engage constructively with Glasgow City Council—I am sure colleagues will ask for similar engagement in their local authority areas. He needs to start showing people that there is a proper plan to mitigate the impact of the closures, particularly on ethnic minority people, as the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) said, on people for whom English is not their first language and on those who have childcare and other caring responsibilities, as the new hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) said. I give the Minister the opportunity to show us that he is up for serious dialogue, because since December last year it has certainly not looked like it.

1.50 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate.

In Inverclyde, we currently have two jobcentres: one in Greenock and another in Port Glasgow. Following the UK Government's consultation, it was determined that the Port Glasgow jobcentre would close, while the Greenock office would be moved to an as yet undetermined location. I believe that this decision is short-sighted and sympathise with the views of staff at the Port Glasgow jobcentre, who have expressed understandable concerns regarding the impact of this change on their clients.

The Minister should know that Inverclyde has some of the worst levels of social deprivation in the UK. Some 26% of children in Inverclyde grow up in poverty; one in 10 live in severe poverty; youth unemployment is

[Ronnie Cowan]

more than double the UK rate; and the number of people on jobseeker's allowance or required to find work on universal credit is double the rate in the UK as a whole.

It might be thought that such a set of circumstances would prompt the Government to grant additional support to the area. Instead, the UK Government's response has been to cut benefits and halve the number of jobcentres in my constituency. A report issued by the Scottish Government found that Inverclyde will experience one of the most significant falls in welfare spending of any Scottish local authority relative to the size of its working-age population. By 2021, this will amount to an overall cut of £15 million—the equivalent of £298 per working-age adult.

Given the challenges that Inverclyde faces, I think it would be appropriate for the Minister to visit my constituency. That is why I wrote to him on 14 June and extended an invitation to meet not only me, but the jobcentre management to discuss the impact of the proposed closure on my constituents. And yes, I am still waiting for a reply. A ministerial visit would also be an opportunity for the UK Government to provide some much-needed assurances regarding the long-term future of the Greenock office and the vital service that it offers. I can see the Minister looking quizzically at me. Is he questioning what I am saying?

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds) indicated dissent.

Ronnie Cowan: Okay. Is the proposed closure of the Port Glasgow jobcentre about providing a better service for users? No, of course it is not. In the words of the Public and Commercial Services Union, the UK Government are “abandoning the unemployed” at a time when many people on lower incomes are facing uncertain futures with respect to their employment.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): On the issue of uncertain futures, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the closure of jobcentres such as mine in Dalkeith will affect women affected by the Pensions Act 2011, dealing the WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality—a double blow, which is unacceptable? Does he join me in wondering where those women will go to find the apprenticeships that Government Members suggest that they find?

Ronnie Cowan: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. It is the classic double whammy that people are put into an impossible situation by the Government and then look for support from them and find that it has been taken away. As we all know, the apprenticeship scheme is just an aberration at the moment.

Unfortunately, all levels of poverty are rising. In-work poverty is on the rise, yet the Minister continues to argue that jobcentre mergers are needed to ensure that the welfare state

“works for those who need it and those who pay for it.”

That kind of irresponsible language detracts from the reality that those who need the service and those who pay for it are in fact the same people. Ultimately, the

whole of society benefits if poverty and inequality are reduced. Jobcentres are supposed to be part of the solution.

Aside from the £1 billion deal with the Democratic Unionist party, the UK Government have made the case over the past seven years that drastic public spending cuts are a financial necessity. The plan to close jobcentres across the UK is part of a wider plan to sell £4.5 billion-worth of Government land and property by 2021. While it is easy to cut services and demonstrate savings made in the short term, it is not so easy to quantify and predict the long-term impact of those changes.

Hannah Bardell: On the matter of property and quantifying decisions, does my hon. Friend agree that the decision to close an HMRC office in my Livingston constituency and an area of West Lothian that is significantly cheaper, and to move it to Edinburgh city centre in a record long-term contract of 20 to 25 years, is just sheer stupidity on the Government's part and clearly a waste of public money?

Ronnie Cowan: I absolutely agree, and could not have put it better myself.

The UK Government have simply not made a convincing case that the proposed closures will benefit clients or society as a whole. Jobcentre staff have contacted me to say that the impact of the closures on disabled people has not been properly assessed. The Scottish Government have indicated that the closures are likely to push many vulnerable people into crisis. Will the Minister meet me in Inverclyde and show that the UK Government are actually listening to those concerns? We are about to set off into recess. I assure the Minister that I will clear my diary and cancel my holidays, and will be there whatever day he wishes to come and visit Inverclyde.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I am going to call Mr Sweeney next, but it is good to see so many new Members here. We will go on until 3 pm, so if you wish to contribute to the debate, please stand in your place and that will indicate to me that you wish to contribute.

1.56 pm

Mr Paul J. Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Evans, for calling me to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this debate on such an important matter affecting the city of Glasgow and all across the United Kingdom.

It is clear that the situation in Glasgow is stark and acute. While the UK unemployment rate is 4.8%, in Glasgow it is 8.5%, essentially twice the UK rate. Justification for the closure and rationalisation of jobcentres is based on the idea that jobcentre provision in Glasgow is higher than the average across the UK, but it is clear that that is necessary to deal with the long-term, intractable problem of structural unemployment in Glasgow. I am utterly incredulous that the Government feel that they are justified in cutting the estate in this manner or that it will in any way benefit or enhance the service provision. How on earth will this help to deal with the long-term problem of structural unemployment?

While we have seen the welcome reduction of unemployment rates in Glasgow, it has left a hard kernel of people who are particularly challenged in getting back into the jobs market. They need much

more intensive and tailored support to meet their specialist needs. It is absurd to suggest that we provide that by continuing to frustrate them by rationalising the jobcentre estate. Some of the areas that the hon. Gentleman referred to, including ones in my constituency such as Possilpark and Carntyne West and Haghill, have the highest Scottish index of multiple deprivation child poverty rates—up to 50% in some cases. Families are already challenged by severe problems in their lives, and to further frustrate their ability to care for themselves in this way is utterly appalling in a modern society.

We have seen the justification that some of the jobcentres in Glasgow are unfit for purpose and unable to accommodate additional supplementary uses. PCS has surveyed and assessed that, and it was found to be untrue. The Maryhill jobcentre is well integrated. It has several rooms that are under-utilised, but it has a number of well integrated services with Glasgow Life, Momentum, Shaw Trust, Homestart and Wyndford hub, including Possilpoint in my constituency, where the service provision transfers across the borders.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, for giving way and apologise, Mr Evans, for being late: I was detained in the Chamber. I echo the hon. Gentleman's tribute to the fantastic work of Maryhill Jobcentre and the disappointment that it is to close. Does he share my concern that this might not be the end? Will he join me in asking the Minister to guarantee that Springburn jobcentre in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, to which Maryhill users are being redirected, will not be under threat, and that there will now be a clear process of transition, advice and support for users who have to make the switch from one jobcentre to another?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that pertinent point about the potential transfer of services from Maryhill to Springburn jobcentre in my constituency. When I reflected on the history of my constituency in my maiden speech last week, I noted with some dismay that it went from having the largest locomotive works in Europe to now having the largest jobcentre in Europe. Although that is perhaps not an asset to be particularly proud of, it is entirely necessary, because my constituency faces some of the highest structural employment rates in this country. He deals with similar issues in parts of his constituency.

Although we have heard the justification for moving to a so-called super-jobcentre in Springburn, we have also heard the announcement that critical back-office staff in Springburn will be cut; I understand that some 200 redundancies are being consulted on. Although the Department has assured us that there will be no compulsory redundancies, I cannot see how practical that is, given that the consultation includes cuts to 280 frontline and desk-based staff in jobcentres in Glasgow.

Although the idea of centralising facilities may seem superficially attractive on a map, anyone with a cursory knowledge of Glasgow's geography and how dysfunctional its public transport system is will be well aware that travelling from Maryhill to Springburn is an utterly arduous journey even for people of fit body like me. I have made the journey to Maryhill regularly because my Army Reserve barracks is there, and I have found that on average it takes 90 minutes to two hours to complete the journey.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: When Members representing Glasgow constituencies during the last Parliament visited senior DWP officials at the jobcentre in Laurieston, I jokingly asked, “Did you use Google Maps to work this out?”, to which they said, “Yes.” Does the hon. Gentleman share my dismay that they based their decision on Google Maps?

Mr Sweeney: I think it is highly likely that they did. It would be utterly bizarre for anyone with any knowledge of Glasgow geography to conclude that it is a practical proposition for people who live in Maryhill catchment to attend services in Springburn. The bus system in Glasgow radiates from the centre; capacity to move across the north of the city is highly limited. The nature of the public transport system in Glasgow is another issue.

Chris Stephens: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that not only did the DWP use Google Maps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) said, but the information on Google Maps was outdated, and some bus services that it advertised no longer operate in our city?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. In recent months, First Glasgow, the predominant bus operator in Glasgow, has cut a number of vital routes that might otherwise have facilitated those journeys. My mum lives in Springburn and works in Clarkston, and she often tells me of the arduous journeys that she makes across the city using First buses. Buses are regularly cancelled arbitrarily, or drivers change. There is no reliability or resilience in the public transport system; using it as a justification for rationalising the estate across Glasgow is highly risky.

Perhaps the DWP's genuine motive is cost-driven. It is not about facilitating improved access; it is a cost-driven exercise to reduce Department overheads and, in the process, to frustrate those trying to access services, in order to reduce claimant rates and benefits being paid to citizens in Glasgow, increasing their concomitant despair, dismay and psychological ill-health. The proposals are utterly unsound, and I urge the Minister to reconsider on a practical basis.

I offer a solution: collocation, which has been advocated by a number of agencies, including the union PCS and Citizens Advice. For example, as a new Member, I have been looking for somewhere to establish a constituency office, which is more easily said than done, particularly in Glasgow North East, where the number of retail units is not huge. I looked at one location in Saracen Street in the heart of Possilpark, one of the areas of highest social deprivation in the United Kingdom, never mind Glasgow or Scotland. I did so for a particular reason: I wanted to make a statement that I was there to serve the community of highest need in my constituency.

I noted that in that street alone, there is a closed-down citizens advice bureau, as well as a unit owned by North Glasgow Housing Association and leased to Jobs & Business Glasgow, which in turn sublets it to Skills Development Scotland. Full rent is paid on the unit, but it is occupied only two days a week; it is being under-utilised. It is there for the taking. Why on earth could the DWP not engage with the agencies to use that opportunity for collocation at minimal cost, sustaining

[*Mr Sweeney*]

the same footprint at a fraction of the price? If it is true that the idea is to re-deploy instead of reducing the number of jobs, surely that would be an essentially cost-neutral exercise that would maintain the footprint while ensuring provision for the people who need it most and dealing with the intractable problem of unemployment in our city.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about collocation. Does he agree that collocation should have been discussed by the DWP, the Scottish Government, local authorities and other organisations before consulting on closures?

Mr Sweeney: Yes, I absolutely agree. Surely the presumption should be in favour of maintaining the footprint at all costs. Any reduction in the estate should be considered only as a final measure once all other possible mitigation options have been exhausted. It is clear to me after even cursory engagement with trying to set up a constituency office that there is ample opportunity out there to utilise alternative measures to maintain the footprint by co-operating with other agencies occupying the same space. That would be a great and worthwhile measure to explore as a first instance. I urge the Minister to engage with all Glasgow Members and city councillors to broker such negotiations as a matter of urgency. Opportunities in Glasgow are ample, and we should consider them in Glasgow and across the United Kingdom to maintain the footprint and operate with efficiency by having an integrated approach to collocation. I am absolutely in favour of that.

The justification for reducing face-to-face engagement is an increasing shift to using IT services. We know that that is a myth. Anyone who has watched the film “I, Daniel Blake” will be aware that among the people who have to deal with and engage with such services, it is not the case. The DWP has failed to understand the fundamental reality of unemployment: there is a cyclical component and a structural component. Obviously, as the economy has recovered, the cyclical component has decreased, but the structural component has remained, particularly in Glasgow. The underlying rate of unemployment is still high: indeed, twice the national average. Those people are generally unable to access IT facilities easily, nor are they necessarily IT-literate. That is why we need to maintain face-to-face services. PCS consultation and research backs that up, determining that the most effective measure for returning people to the jobs market was a face-to-face account management offer through DWP jobcentres. We must maintain that level of service. An online system is not a substitute.

These are the people whom we need to support the most. They may be using library IT facilities, which are so oversubscribed in Glasgow that time limits on users have been introduced. People who are already unsure and unconfident about using IT facilities are now time-limited—much as you might want to time-limit me, Mr Evans—in utilising them. Imagine the stress associated with not only filling out a complex and convoluted form but doing so under the pressure of a ticking clock. That is clearly not a good situation. It would be much preferable if those facilities were available through a face-to-face consultation.

To draw my points together, it is clear that the consultation is a sham, driven by the preconceived outcome of reducing the estate. It is not about consultation on mitigation in any meaningful way, as the collocation option has clearly not been explored in any depth. I urge the Minister to consider that as a proactive and collaborative measure that could serve the interests of driving a more efficient use of public resources while maintaining a critical level of service provision to the communities that need it most.

The justification based on geographic proximity is utterly untrue. Not only do the new locations lie outside the 2.5-mile radius that was supposed to be used; the walking and travel times are much longer and more arduous than a cursory look at Google Maps might suggest.

Glasgow’s situation is unique. It has a long-term structural unemployment problem, particularly in Glasgow North East and in the constituencies of other Glasgow Members present today. We need much more focused and intensive support, so it is critical to maintain the current footprint of jobcentres in Glasgow. It might be justifiable to argue that we have a greater density of them than other cities, but that is for a very good reason indeed: Glasgow has historically had a problem with unemployment, so it is critical we maintain our jobcentres.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I hope the Minister will take our points on board and offer a meaningful and practical solution, so that we can maintain a great public service in Glasgow and ensure that we share the same objective of reducing and minimising unemployment in Glasgow. Let us do something productive to achieve that.

2.10 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Evans; I am grateful to have caught your eye, having come in slightly late. I will make just a couple of brief comments.

One of the consequences of the general election result in Scotland is that we can now demonstrate cross-party consensus in our concerns. [*Interruption.*] A certain degree of cross-party consensus, at least. I pay tribute to my new neighbour, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and welcome him to his place.

The impact of these jobcentre closures will be felt very strongly across the communities of Glasgow and in the other parts of Scotland and the United Kingdom that are affected. The Minister cannot say that he has not been warned, because we have repeatedly brought our concerns to Westminster Hall and to the main Chamber. The responses to the consultation reflected the disproportionate impact that the closures will have on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. They include people who really depend on the services that jobcentres provide to get the skills and training to bring them back into the labour market: people with disabilities, people from socially deprived backgrounds, and single parents—particularly single mothers, who we heard a lot from in the process we went through in Maryhill.

What we need from the Minister now is some kind of certainty about the next steps. When will a timetable be announced? What transitional arrangements will be in

place for the service users who will have to start making these journeys? Will they get a guarantee that if they miss appointments or arrive late because of the public transport issues that Glasgow Members have highlighted, they will not be subject to sanctions? That is the kind of certainty that the Minister urgently needs to provide, along with a timetable for when all this will happen.

Another key issue that has come up in the process and that has to be taken into account in the next steps is dialogue with the Scottish Government. We have repeatedly heard from Ministers in the Scottish Government that—much like Members of this House—they have been informed of decisions at the last minute, or even after those decisions have been announced to the public. They have not had any opportunity for discussions about collocation or pulling services together. I hope that as the estate contraction process takes place, the Minister will ensure full engagement with the Scottish Government and with the relevant local authorities.

There are broader questions about the process of downsizing the estate. When the consultation began, I heard quite a lot from Ministers that this was about providing the best possible service to users. When the results of the consultation and the final decision were announced, they said, “Well, actually, this was a financial decision about effective use of the estate, under-utilised buildings and so on. It was the consequence of a contract that was entered into under the new Labour Government—a public-private partnership, essentially.” What further efforts have this Government undertaken to review the contract with Trillium? What discussions have they had about the next time there has to be an estate review? I have asked written questions about that.

What about other aspects of the DWP estate—not least the prime property at Caxton House in central London, to which we were all invited for a meeting before the general election? First, did Ministers consider whether it was necessary to retain it? Secondly, what if Trillium decided that it wanted to keep its hands on it and booted everybody out? Were contingency plans made for that? Why not disperse some of the DWP staff further across the United Kingdom?

It is incredibly disappointing that we have to keep coming back here with these questions, but I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this important debate before the summer recess. I also congratulate the other Members who have participated, and I thank you again, Mr Evans, for allowing me to contribute at short notice.

2.15 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I feel enticed to say a few words, because other hon. Members have painted a rather gloomy picture of certain elements of Glasgow. I am an Ayrshire chappie and I do not know Glasgow that well. In Ayrshire, there are some disappointing aspects of the modernisation of the DWP estate and some things that I am not entirely happy with. However, some elements of the rather gloomy and dull picture that has been painted lie with the nationalist Scottish Government and with the poverty and inequalities that they should be addressing. [*Interruption.*] I am sure they do lie there—I am sure they are devolved issues, as SNP Members would be quick to tell us.

There is pain along with the change. Any change brings pain, but this is a modernisation of the estate.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The hon. Gentleman talks about modernisation—I cannot believe what I am hearing. This is a closure. We were never asked about modernisation, collocation or anything else—that has all come from us. The Government are proposing closures, nothing else.

Bill Grant: I beg to differ. We see the same thing in different ways. It is modernisation. Things change; we cannot stand still. There will be pain—there is always pain when there is change. I am absolutely certain of that, and I concede to some of the concerns the hon. Gentleman raised, but I am sure that the Minister will bring something forward.

There have been changes in the way people do business. Footfall has probably reduced to some extent because of online facilities, modernisation and the way we conduct business through social media and the internet. Things change, and they do not always bring pleasure. I am sure there will be pain. There is pain in Ayrshire—we are losing an office there—so I am not immune to it either.

As for transport, I sat on the Strathclyde partnership for transport for many years. The transport system in Glasgow is quite good, including the underground with its inner and outer circle, and the buses. I concede to the expertise of Glasgow Members—they live there and I do not—but I have always found the transport system there to be very good.

Hugh Gaffney: Coatbridge is outside Glasgow—it is rural. People depend on these jobs in rural communities in Coatbridge, just as they do in Ayrshire. The hon. Gentleman talks about travelling into Glasgow, but the people of Coatbridge do not want to travel anywhere. We want local government jobs for local people so that we can look after our families and local communities. That is the essential point, which is the same in Coatbridge as in Ayrshire.

Bill Grant: I must announce to Members gathered here today that my mother-in-law comes from the Whifflet in Coatbridge, so I know it rather well. Links into the city centre were never particularly difficult—and it was a great place to have a pint of beer, I might add.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman talks about the estate being modernised. Could he tell me what is modern about asking the poorest and most vulnerable to travel further to a jobcentre to secure work?

Bill Grant: My point about modernisation was to do with the estate, and I said that there would be pain. To me, the estate means the physical structure of the buildings—the floors, the roof, the ceilings and so on. I did concede that there would be pain, and I accept what the hon. Gentleman says, but we cannot stand still. No one can, no matter what sphere of business they are in or what service they provide.

Yes, there will be pain. I do not gloat or take any pleasure in the idea of somebody having to catch two buses and then get the train or the underground. There are challenges. If people are not at work, I am sure they

[*Bill Grant*]

will have considerable time to make the journey to the jobcentre and back, but there may be people who are incapacitated who find difficulties. I accept that that is an extreme challenge.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Is the hon. Gentleman in favour of the closures or against them? I am unclear.

Bill Grant: I am not going to answer that directly.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Of course not!

Bill Grant: Of course not—I am being honest. I am in favour of modernisation, not standing still, and I am in favour of being progressive. There is a very good phrase used in the Scottish Parliament: “This is a progressive issue.” We are progressing with the DWP estate. I believe that that is happening throughout the United Kingdom—it is not confined to Glasgow—but there will be pain.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): We now move on to the wind-ups. That speech was not the wind-up, by the way.

2.19 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. It is also a pleasure to see my old friend from the Strathclyde fire board, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I can confirm that he is a bit of a wind-up merchant, but his comments failed to address the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) started with. The issue is the structural poverty and historic unemployment and deprivation that Glasgow and the west of Scotland still see as a result of the Tory legacy from the '80s and beyond. This Tory Government seem set on compounding that poverty and misery and making it worse. They are not looking at the communities that the cuts affect; they are looking only at lines on a map or on Google Maps. They are not looking at the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, as my hon. Friend mentioned. If that index was placed over the map, they would see that the cuts are falling on the poorest communities and those who need support the most. They deserve support the most, because they are the furthest away from the labour market.

I do not know whether the Minister has since taken it down, but when he had us over to his office after the cuts were announced, he had an enormous poster on his wall, right behind where he sat. It was a kind of heat map of the joblessness figures for the whole country, and Glasgow was a great big red beacon on that map. That is exactly where the cuts are falling and where support is needed the most.

My hon. Friends have mentioned the issues with the digital divide. They talked about how difficult it is for people, such as the character in “I, Daniel Blake”, who are pencil by default rather than digital by default. That is true of people in the east end of Glasgow and many of the poorer communities in Scotland. Citizens Advice Scotland did a report a few years ago called “Offline and left behind”, which pointed out that the majority of CAB clients it sees would struggle to apply for benefits and jobs online. That will continue to be the case,

because many of them are older workers and further away from the job market. The hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) mentioned the 1950s women affected by the state pension changes. The Government have made great play of trumpeting that there will be support for those women. Where will that support be if the infrastructure they rely on is taken away from their communities?

I have mentioned before in the Chamber that I met a woman in my constituency outside Bridgeton jobcentre, which is due to close. She was in bits. She was a WASPI woman who was being forced back to work. She was continually receiving letters calling her into Bridgeton jobcentre. Because it was just down the street from her house, she was able to get her biffies on to get there, but she was scared going in. She was terrified. She was crying going in and coming back out. These are the kind of women who need to be able to access support nearby. Getting up, getting fully dressed, getting on a bus and travelling to the other end of the city would be too much for her. She would fall out of the system and get no support at all. That is not acceptable, and it is not the kind of society we want.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked, who will pick up the slack? Who will take up the burden when the jobcentre has gone away? It will be services such as the Scottish Association for Mental Health and the Glasgow Association for Mental Health, which provide so much support to people with mental health issues that are preventing them from taking a job, caused by trauma they have experienced or issues they have had in their lives. Those issues are multiple and complex, and we ignore them at our peril.

The Government are content to let the voluntary sector, food banks and charities pick up where the state has left off and rolled back. The Tory Government are obsessed with dismantling the social security infrastructure of our nation. The things that were put in place to help and support people when they need it most are all being unravelled. That speaks to the issue with the HMRC offices and the DWP back offices. In a lot of cases, they were placed so as to facilitate economic growth in areas that had issues. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) illustrated that perfectly by talking about the impact on the wider community of the 250 jobs and £4,000 a week. I would not be surprised if the figure were higher. It is a small sample—a snapshot in time—of the people who go there to work and use the local sandwich shop or the local paper shop. They will buy things in the high street on their way to and from the office. That is true of every single jobcentre that the Government propose to close. Closures will have an impact on the local economy. Empty buildings will be sitting in communities going unused and becoming derelict.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Lady will know that many communities in Glasgow have seen regeneration of their high streets. In particular, there are many great regeneration initiatives in Glasgow that aim to find new and innovative uses for high streets. Surely a progressive measure would be for the DWP to work in partnership with regeneration agencies in Glasgow to look at options such as collocation that would drive vibrancy back into high streets, drive economic activity, drive better job opportunities into

communities and create a virtuous cycle of economic growth in Glasgow and around the UK. That is surely what the DWP should be looking at, rather than having a silo mentality of cutting overheads at the expense of everything else. It should be looking at how it can crowd in growth and opportunities through other more entrepreneurial activity, such as collocation.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree with the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. Clyde Gateway, which works in my constituency and across the boundary into Lanarkshire, is a prime example of that. It was not consulted. It has been the driver for economic regeneration in the east end of Glasgow. It has got people into work. It has looked at the people who are furthest away from the job market and got them into apprenticeships and real paying jobs against all the odds of ill health and deprivation, but it was not consulted or involved in the process. It was not asked about collocation. It would bite the Government's hand off if they wanted to move HMRC offices from the city centre out to the east end of Glasgow, because it knows the impact that would have on positive regeneration. It would bring in jobs and benefit to the wider economy. It knows that, and it has tried to attract organisations such as Police Scotland, which has come into the area. The area is starting to come up, because it is getting those extra, good-value jobs, and people are moving into the area to build their lives rather than just coming in and out for work. That is hugely important.

The Government would save money with collocation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) pointed out, it is much cheaper to have offices in Livingston than in the centre of Edinburgh and much cheaper to have jobs in Dalmarnock or Shawfield than in the city centre of Glasgow. The Government are wedded to the idea of shiny big offices in the city centre. If it is not important where the jobs are done, why should they be done in the most expensive office space that can be found? Why can they not be in local communities, giving benefit to the wider area? As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South said, that is part of the Government's cack-handed approach to the issue.

The Government have not looked at the data. We have all asked written parliamentary questions, and they cannot show us the data that evidences the decisions. It is not there. They do not know how many claimants of particular types go and use the jobcentres in question. With the transition to universal credit, it is likely that those jobcentres might be needed more rather than less, because people will need to go in and out about the work-related aspects of universal credit, when they are asked to do more work or earn more. The Government do not seem to be thinking about that at all.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, we do not know any detail on outreach. I ask the Government to be careful about how it is done, because there is a huge stigma for some people in accessing jobcentre services. If they are going in and out of the building they can just about cope, but if the services start to be in the community centre, their pals might know they are going in. An officer might sanction someone right there in the middle of the canteen. Such things are really upsetting, and the Government need to think about how they are done,

not only for the safety, data protection and dignity of the people using that service, but for the safety of staff. The number of attacks on jobcentre staff has gone up as people get increasingly upset and frustrated with the process. The Government have a duty to those staff to ensure that they are safe, wherever the service is.

There is a security guard on the front door of each jobcentre in Glasgow. If I walk in, someone will come up and challenge me and say, "Who are you? Why are you here?" Within seconds of me walking in the door in Bridgeton, they were saying that. There is a reason for that, and the Government need to think about the safety of staff when they proceed. They need to be careful to do it in a sensitive and effective way. I suppose the Government would know that if they had visited any of the jobcentres in Glasgow or the wider area. I imagine a Government entourage would roll into the building and the jobcentre staff would know they were coming, unlike when I just pitch up on the doorstep, but the Government should consider trying that. They should take up the offer of my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) to visit the jobcentres in Inverclyde, or any jobcentre at all. They could understand the geography and see what it is like for clients to go from one place to another on two buses. Rather than just sitting in an office using Google Maps, they should do the journey themselves.

We have invited the Minister before to come on journeys with us around Glasgow. As part of its campaign, the *Evening Times* in Glasgow did case studies and went out on journeys to and from all the different jobcentres. It has done great campaigning work on the issue, and it knows the city well—certainly a good deal better than Ministers.

Mr Sweeney: There are a couple of relevant points about the need to have a security guard on the door, which reflects a number of problems with the current provision. There is the protection and morale of staff, but there is also the morale and self-esteem of the people who use the service. It is a measure of how the service conducts itself and how the interface with the service feels. People who already have anxiety issues, low self-esteem and problems with engaging are being introduced to this kind of Kafkaesque nightmare, where they feel intimidated and are effectively being negatively influenced to dissociate themselves from using the service.

Alison Thewliss: I agree that it seems to be part of a wider plan to stop people using the services in the first place and to get people away from going there and seeking support.

I cannot speak for the rest of the country, but I will speak for Glasgow. What is good about jobcentres in Glasgow is that Bridgeton, Parkhead and Easterhouse all have citizens advice bureaux round the corner, very close to people. If someone finds themselves sanctioned or is stressed or worried, or needs extra support, that support is literally around the corner. They can cross the road to get there, and that help and support will be there. I know from speaking to staff at citizens advice centres in Glasgow that that happens regularly; they are there to provide that service. At Shettleston, which will replace Bridgeton, Parkhead and Easterhouse, there is no citizens advice bureau across the road. I wonder why that is.

[*Alison Thewliss*]

In Possil, as was mentioned, there are other services as well. In Langside, there is a college across the road, which is exactly where we would want something that can encourage people to up their qualifications and seek new opportunities.

There are opportunities for collocation that we know the Government have not even explored or looked at. I understand that they offered something to the Scottish Government with no options. Rather than engaging properly and thoroughly, they said, “This is what we are thinking of doing—and we are doing it.” As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, they did that rather than looking at the whole estate and what is the best type of service for people—what works and actually improves things. In all the discussion, there has been nothing about which jobcentres are effective and which are not. Where do things work well for people and where do they not, and how can we improve that? It is just all about cuts, not about people.

Bill Grant: I come back to my theme of modernisation. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order.

Bill Grant: I visited the Ayr jobcentre a couple of weeks ago, as I did the one in Cumnock. Cumnock is a deprived area and there are challenges there. On my modernisation theme, I recall a visit as far back as 2005 and 2006, when I retired from the fire service and went to the jobcentre in Ayr. It was a very uninviting, dark and intimidating place. The staff were behind screens for their protection. It was not very welcoming.

I say the word “modernisation” again, because when I went to the Ayr jobcentre just a couple of weeks ago, it was a very warm and welcoming place. The staff’s morale was high and they were enthused to tell me of the good work they were doing. Somebody will keep me right, but I thought the term was “job coaches” for those employed to encourage people into work. They were proud of the work that they had done through the modernisation of the premises. I found the staff’s morale high, though they are better judges of that. In some cases, modernisation works. I found it warm and welcoming there, whereas more than a decade ago it was a terrible place to visit.

Alison Thewliss: Modernisation is fine, but that is very different from shutting it, which is what is happening in this situation. These jobcentres are not being modernised—they are being removed and closed; they are gone. Modernisation is not what this debate is about.

I appreciate that time is tight and I have gone on for a wee while now. My hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North and for Glasgow South and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) powerfully raised the need for an equality impact assessment. The Government said that they would provide an equality impact assessment of each jobcentre after the event, not before deciding on the closures. We have not seen those as yet.

Hugh Gaffney rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Just before this intervention, I would give a gentle reminder that we are now under some time limits, in order to give equal time to the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, and Members will also want to hear what the Minister has to say. Are you taking an intervention now?

Alison Thewliss: Yes; I am just about done.

Hugh Gaffney: Has the Minister watched “I, Daniel Blake”? Let us be modern and look at the world. Ken Loach made a very good film, so let us look at “I, Daniel Blake” and have a reality check on the whole DWP estate.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman will find that Ministers will never say whether they have watched it. They probably ought to. I would be happy to put on a movie night if that would help.

We need to see the data and to know what happens next. We need to know what happens in the transition period and what the alternative services are, and whether there are going to be outreach services. What I really want more than anything else is for the people in our constituencies in Glasgow and right across the country, wherever they are, to have a no-sanction guarantee, at the very least for an interim period until the new arrangement settles in. If one person gets sanctioned because their bus does not turn up, that is an absolute scandal that falls on this Government. I will raise any constituency case I get of that kind with the Minister on the Floor of the House; he will know all about it.

2.35 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing what is and remains a really important debate—although we have had it several times already. He spoke powerfully of the intergenerational poverty and deprivation in his constituency. That was a theme picked up by the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who spoke of the impact of the closures on some of the poorest in the UK.

There was also a strong contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who talked about the impact that the 250 job losses will have on the local economy in his constituency. Members also spoke of the disproportionate impacts on certain groups in society—most notably my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), on black and Asian people, and my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), on WASPI women.

From the Government Benches, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) said that there will be pain and that for some people there will be extreme challenges. I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

As we know, the Government have recently confirmed plans to close around one in 10 jobcentres in the UK by March 2018. Public consultations were held on just 30 of the 78 jobcentre closures proposed in January, and only 16 have been reprieved, with three additional closures

now confirmed. We understand that 590 jobcentres will be retained, 109 will be closed, and 50 collocations will go ahead. The future of eight sites is still to be negotiated. Yet the Department for Work and Pensions has yet to provide details of when each office closure is to take place, even though some could be as early as this summer. Will the Minister tell us when the first centres are scheduled to close, and which ones they are? People have a right to know. Will he publish the current closure dates planned for each office, so that people can have as much information as possible to make provision as they need to for the change in circumstances?

Jobcentres provide really important services in our communities, offering services that are designed to support people should they be unfortunate enough to lose their jobs or become ill or disabled, as well as for those who have been disabled throughout their lives. It is often said that how a society treats its most vulnerable is a mark of its civilisation. Our social security system is precious and should be there for people in their time of need. However, it appears that the Government are eroding our social security system and failing to pay heed to the needs of individuals and communities, at a time when we face the uncertainties of Brexit, increased job insecurity with 1 million people on zero-hours contracts, a crisis in low pay and the Government's introduction of in-work conditionality—sanctions for working people, as it is also known.

It is increasingly clear that the impact of the closures on claimants will be considerable and the effect will be most acutely felt by the most vulnerable in our society, such as the chronically sick, the disabled and those with caring responsibilities, along with those with poor or no IT skills. Where, then, are the equality impact assessments for the closures? We have asked for them, but they are still yet to be seen. The Government are disregarding the needs of communities at the very time when the world of work is changing rapidly. The Government are yet to publish the equality analysis for the closures. Can the Minister give an exact date for when the full equality analysis will be published?

The Secretary of State said it is reasonable to ask claimants to travel further to another jobcentre as that is what people in work have to do every day, but he does not take into account the fact that those people have wages to pay their travel fares. People claiming social security are more likely to have a health problem or disability. They are more likely to struggle to travel longer distances, and as a result are at greater risk of being sanctioned for being late. People with children may also find it difficult to travel longer distances. What assessment has the Department made of the impact of the closures on claimants' travel times, and of the associated costs? Can the Government specify whether the travel time includes those who cannot afford public transport and have to walk?

Marsha De Cordova: On the issue of the closures, it would be helpful if the Minister could talk about travel times and set out what mechanisms will be in place to support those with mobility issues or other disabilities, who will have to travel further. What adjustments will be made for those protected groups?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a really good point, and it is important that the Minister responds to it.

What guidance does the Department intend to give staff on sanctioning people who miss an appointment because they have to travel further? We need to be clear about what sanctioning can mean to people. A first sanction means no benefits for four weeks. A second sanction means no benefits for three months. A third sanction means no benefits for up to three years. The system risks forcing people into destitution, crime or suicide, so this is a really important issue.

Let us consider the roll-out of the full service of universal credit. The DWP is reducing its estate at the same time as it is speeding up roll-out of the full service of UC. Over the past two years, the full service of universal credit has been rolled out to five new areas each month. This month, it has been extended to 30, and there are plans for it to be accelerated in October to 55 new areas per month. If the DWP feels able to announce such far-reaching plans to close jobcentres, it must surely have a clear idea of what the impact will be on work coaches, who are at the centre of its plans for employment support, but the Minister's answer to a written question I submitted asking for the DWP's assessment of the optimal number of universal credit claimants in a work coach's caseload was vague to say the least. Will the Minister give us a clearer response today? What is his Department's assessment of the optimal number of universal credit claimants a work coach can deal with, for both the live service and the full service? Or is his Department forging ahead with plans to close jobcentres without a clear idea of the number of staff needed?

The closure of jobcentres and the migration to online applications will make it harder for many people to claim social security. Many people do not have access to computers or mobiles, are unable to carry out transactions, or are not able to use the internet at all. A 2015 study by Citizens Advice Scotland found that 59% of respondents were unable to make an application for benefits online without help, and 30% of respondents were not able to apply for a benefit online at all. In Glasgow's most deprived areas, almost half of respondents had never used the internet. More than half of clients did not have a computer or a device they could use to access the internet, and more than 40% of survey respondents could not use a computer at all. The Minister's response, when questioned on claimants' access to IT, has been to say that jobcentres provide access to PCs. If jobcentres are closing in large numbers, surely there will be less access to PCs for those who need to use them.

It is becoming clearer that the full digital service roll-out is experiencing major problems. Claimants are forced to spend increasingly long periods on the phone to try to resolve issues relating to their claims. A recent Citizens Advice report suggests that sometimes the only way to resolve a problem is to go to a jobcentre directly. The report calls for a comprehensive support package to be put in place, offering face-to-face help with all aspects of making and managing a universal credit claim. Will the DWP listen to Citizens Advice's call for such a package? What is the DWP's assessment of the effectiveness with which the full digital service is being rolled out? The process is called "test and learn". Can the Minister please tell us what has been learned so far?

Let me turn to back-of-house offices. Front-facing jobcentres are not the only service the DWP is cutting. All but two back-of-house offices face closure, and staff

[*Margaret Greenwood*]

are to be concentrated in a small number of hubs. That will have serious implications for staff, who will be forced to travel further or move. For some people, that will be practically impossible. Can the Minister tell us how many people will be made redundant, first, from the planned jobcentre closures, and secondly, from the closure of back-of-house offices?

Let me turn to the health and safety impact. The transfer of staff and claimants from jobcentres that are closing also raises health and safety issues. The closures will put more pressure on overstretched staff. The Minister said that work coaches are the central customer-facing role, but Jobcentre Plus staff dealing with phone inquiries about claims are also frontline staff. It can be extremely stressful to answer calls from people who are frustrated about a problem with their claim or delays in processing it. The Public and Commercial Services Union reports that staff are already being taken away from processing claims to answer phone lines, which leads to a vicious cycle: claimants are more likely to phone to ask what is happening to their claim because it has not been processed due to the delays. Apparently, among staff, it is known as the “cycle of hell”—a circle of inefficiency and stress, which they are struggling to get out of. Will the Minister tell us what steps he is taking to ensure the health and wellbeing of staff in DWP offices?

The Secretary of State said on 6 July that the DWP is actively recruiting. That is welcome, but I would be grateful if the Minister could share with us the DWP’s current assessment of Jobcentre Plus’s performance on staff retention. Will the DWP publish statistics on the turnover of Jobcentre Plus and back-of-house office staff?

[*MIKE GAPES in the Chair*]

In the debate on 6 July, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) rightly raised the issue of the safety of young people who travel from different parts of south London, in the context of increasing youth violence. PCS raised similar concerns with me in relation to other major cities. Problems are likely to arise when services are merged in one office in an area with a gang culture. That serious issue is likely to affect staff and claimants, so it is important that the DWP listens to and acts upon the concerns of staff in such cases. Will the Minister give an assurance that he will do that? What support is DWP offering staff to ensure they maintain their emotional and physical wellbeing at work?

It is important that there is sufficient room space available in the remaining jobcentres so claimants who have to disclose personal information can do so in privacy. Has the DWP carried out a health and safety assessment of the impact of the planned closures? If not, why not? If it has, will it publish it?

My concern is that acceleration of the roll-out of the full digital services of universal credit, together with the programme of the rapid closure of jobcentres, will put intolerable pressure on staff and create chaos for claimants—especially the most vulnerable. The Government’s answer to any criticism of cuts to social security is that work is the best route out of poverty. Why, then, are they closing jobcentres on such a scale, when they offer services that are specifically designed to help people find employment?

2.47 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate. He and others will be aware that this subject has already been debated extensively in Parliament. There has been an Opposition day debate, a Westminster Hall debate, an Adjournment debate and a Back-Bench business debate. There was another Westminster Hall debate yesterday, specifically on south Wales. The issue has been raised at DWP questions and Scotland Office questions. There have been two urgent questions and a substantial body of written questions.

Today’s debate has been wide-ranging. We heard a full exposition from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and a very interesting speech from the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). In the time left, I will do my best to cover as many of the points that have been raised as possible.

The Government are committed to maintaining our record of protecting the most vulnerable while supporting everyone to fulfil their potential and play their full part in society. That includes reforming the welfare system by making work pay, supporting those unable to work and examining our assets to ensure that we are deploying resources effectively. On 31 March 2018, the DWP’s 20-year private finance initiative contract with Telereal Trillium, which covers the majority of the DWP’s current property portfolio of some 900 sites, comes to an end. That date provides an opportunity—indeed, an imperative—to review which office locations we need and how our estate is to be managed in the future. We have sought to do that in a way that delivers better value for the taxpayer and makes best use of the space available, while continuing to deliver vital support to claimants and pursuing our reform agenda.

Margaret Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I am sorry, I will not. The hon. Lady will have to forgive me, but I want to answer as many questions as possible.

To give some context, the DWP occupies about 1.5 million square metres of office space, but the way it operates is significantly different from 20 years ago, meaning that at least 20% of that space is under-occupied. The falling claimant count and the increased use of online services in recent years mean that 20% of the money the Department spends on rent goes towards space we are not using. By paying only for the space we need and the services required to operate from it, we anticipate saving £140 million per year over the next 10 years. To be clear, this is not about reducing services—the hon. Member for Wirral West alluded to that—but about taking the opportunity to stop spending taxpayers’ money on empty space and instead spend more to support those in need.

The labour market is in its strongest position for some years: the employment rate is 74.8%, the joint highest figure on record, and since 2010 unemployment has reduced by 913,000 and the overall number of people claiming the main out-of-work benefits has fallen by more than 1.1 million. In Glasgow over the past four years, the claimant count has come down from 27,890 to

16,800. The DWP estate is bigger than it needs to be, is not flexible enough to deal with the needs of the Department's customers now and in the future and, in some instances, is of poor quality, preventing improvements such as digital innovation and more interactive ways of working with customers.

The Department is not transforming its estate in isolation. In June 2013, the Government published their first overall estate strategy, which was expanded in October 2014. The strategy aims to ensure that all Departments are working towards an effective and efficient Government estate that provides value for money to the taxpayer, delivers better, more integrated public services and acts as an enabler of growth. In January this year, we announced proposals to rationalise the DWP estate. The proposals encompassed most of our Jobcentre Plus offices, processing centres and head office buildings. Our announcements on 5 July finalised those plans for the majority of sites.

In our processing centres, the changes move towards creating larger, modern, digitally enabled centres, with teams working on several areas coming together to deliver a joined-up, efficient service to our customers. The focus is on creating an estate with a much improved working environment, with more opportunities for our staff to develop, learn new skills and progress.

Significant investment starting in 2018 will include the opening of a new processing centre in Glasgow, which will allow us to bring together colleagues from smaller, older sites across the area into a new property fitted out to create an efficient, effective working environment that allows the DWP to align more closely with other Departments working in the area. With the existing large processing site in Northgate, that will result in a DWP presence of more than 2,000 staff in Glasgow. In total in Scotland, we will keep a substantial processing presence, with large sites in locations such as Falkirk and Kilmarnock expanding to bring further jobs into those areas.

That investment will continue with a new purpose-built site in the Treforest area to the north of Cardiff in south Wales, which will bring together colleagues from smaller, older sites across the region into a new building and provide about 1,600 jobs in one of the most deprived areas in the UK. We are also working on similar large processing sites in Bristol, Birmingham and Hastings. Together with the changes to how we work in some of our remaining properties, that will create a processing estate that will be able to support the Department well into the future, while remaining flexible enough to deal with changing needs over the coming years.

The changes in the jobcentre network focus on three things: first, moving some jobcentres to shared Government premises to allow for better, more efficient use of space and a more co-ordinated service; secondly, moving some jobcentres to new buildings because the quality of the existing property is not up to scratch or is unable to meet the needs of our customers now and in the future; and thirdly, merging smaller and underused jobcentres to create larger operations that offer a better, more joined-up service to our customers. The changes include around 40 new opportunities to collocate jobcentre services into local authority or community premises, which will result in about 80 collocations in total.

In Scotland, we have 95 jobcentres, which is more jobcentres per head of population than in England. The changes will result in 11 jobcentres merging into nearby

offices, three jobcentres moving into shared offices with local authorities and councils, and one jobcentre moving into an improved building in the same town. The resulting 85 jobcentres across the country still leaves Scotland with significantly more offices per head of population than England.

In Glasgow, we have 17 jobcentres, which the hon. Member for Glasgow South West acknowledged in his opening speech was more per head of population than in any other major city in Great Britain. Even with the reduction to 11 jobcentres, Glasgow will continue to have more per head of population than other cities. We consulted on three moves in Glasgow—Maryhill, Castlemilk and Bridgeton—and held a further consultation on Broxburn. The changes will enable the Department to offer a more efficient service while delivering value for the taxpayer.

The changes have been developed working closely with local leaders, using their local knowledge of the area, travel network, customers and community needs. Distance and journey times were calculated using a variety of methods to ensure accuracy in our planning, including online tools and timetables, as well as information collected on local public transport routes. Most importantly, that was all used to inform discussions with local staff, with their experience and knowledge of their areas.

Any change with an impact on DWP employees has involved consultation with them and their trade unions. In most cases, staff consultation began with an announcement back in January, followed by three to five weeks of discussion when we considered the impact of any changes on their offices. We have consulted the public on any jobcentre mergers that may mean customers will have to travel a little further. There is no statutory requirement for such consultation, but we were committed to making the decisions in consultation and have conducted public consultations on all proposed closures of jobcentres that fall outside the ministerial criteria.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I was trying to leave the hon. Gentleman a minute at the end, but he may go ahead.

Chris Stephens: The Minister has outlined the Government strategy. May I ask him a simple question? Is he saying that more jobcentre closures are on the cards? In other words, is the Department planning more closures?

Damian Hinds: I am fairly sure that I was talking not about that, but about the consultation criteria. At the end of the process, we will have a settled estate, which will put us in a better position to share services and so on with other bodies.

I will skip over some of my material and respond directly to some of the questions that came up in the debate. The hon. Member for Wirral West asked about concerns about travel times and travel costs. I reassure Members that claimants can be reimbursed for any travel to jobcentres that is more frequent than fortnightly. For those on JSA for more than 13 weeks and, in some circumstances, from the very first day on other benefits, it is possible to apply for a Jobcentre Plus travel discount card, which is available for different local transport companies. Of course, anyone on employment and support

[*Damian Hinds*]

allowance is not asked to attend the jobcentre regularly. The existing outreach services and the additional ones that we will put in place as a result of the changes will give us more presence in local areas.

On sanctions, the point is that we ask people to make reasonable efforts to get to appointments and other things they have committed to as part of their job search. There will be a transition time as people get used to different arrangements, but the requirement for people to make reasonable efforts will always remain.

On access to online facilities, DWP always has an alternative to online, but in this day and age it is also true that to look for work and to be in work, it is increasingly essential to have some IT skills. We therefore think it is important to help people with that, which is one of the reasons why we provide IT equipment in jobcentre lobbies and have people who can help claimants with it.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) asked whether the other jobcentres in Glasgow have the capacity to take in the extra operations. The answer is that they do—that is the entire basis of our plans. We will put outreach in place in those locations where we had a public consultation because the distances travelled would be a little further.

We want to minimise all risk of job losses. We have not yet completed all the conversations with staff, and we are continuing to have those one-to-ones. The DWP has a good record over many years of retaining staff. We will seek to facilitate that as much as possible.

Some of the questions were about working with the Scottish Government. We are keen to do so, and we look forward to more such opportunities in future. I was also asked about the equality impact assessment, and we have built in consideration of the impact on people with protected characteristics through all stages of the estates project process. We will continue to do so, thus fulfilling our duty under the Equalities Act 2010.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): You have 10 seconds, Mr Stephens.

2.59 pm

Chris Stephens: I will just say this: taking away places that give people a safety net is not modernisation, but a recalling of Victorian values.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Combat Compensation

3 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government proposals for better combat compensation.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, in the last Westminster Hall debate before the recess. I refuse to call it the graveyard shift—this is an extraordinarily important debate. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), to his seat. May I formally put on the record the whole House's gratitude to him for his work, particularly during the terrorist incident, when he administered CPR to PC Keith Palmer? He is a real hero, who has served in uniform and stepped up to the mark when his country needed him.

This debate addresses concerns arising from the “Better combat compensation” consultation, which ran until 23 February 2017 and on which the Government have yet to publish their conclusions. According to the Government, an enhanced compensation scheme will address the

“urgent need to reform the current system for dealing with compensation claims brought before the Courts and provide clarity in law on issues of negligence which may contribute to deaths and injuries suffered by members of our Armed Forces in combat.”

Linked to that scheme, the Government propose to enshrine in legislation an extension to combat immunity, so that it not only applies to deaths or injuries that occur in the course of combat but covers all military operations.

The Secretary of State for Defence has stated that those proposals arise from three main concerns: that service personnel and ex-service personnel who are injured in combat can be drawn into long and frustrating legal cases; that the legal costs of such cases borne by the taxpayer often far outstrip the damages awarded; and that judges are required to second-guess military decisions using criteria appropriate in civilian life.

In essence, through its “Better combat compensation” proposals, the Ministry of Defence plans to scrap the legal duty of care that it owes to service personnel. That duty of care has been in force since 1987, when Parliament repealed section 10 of the Crown Proceedings Act 1947 to provide protection for those who bravely serve their country. I find it hard to believe that the Minister believes that it is both legally and morally right that the MOD should be allowed to legislate its way out of that duty of care.

I will first address the concern that judges are required to second-guess military decisions using criteria appropriate in civilian life. The courts already recognise the difference between cases involving military decisions made by armed forces personnel in combat and civilian cases where the duty of care applies. The duty of care is not exclusive; it applies to all walks of life. That is reflected by the fact that not a single court decision has second-guessed a military decision made in a battlefield situation.

The right of access to the courts is a long-established common law right that is now enshrined in article 6 of the European convention on human rights. Any exclusion

of that right would require primary legislation, which would need to be judged compatible with the convention. Does the Minister know whether such legislation would be judged compatible? If it would, when do the Government propose to bring forward such legislation? There was no mention of it in the Queen's Speech.

Extending combat immunity could be a slippery slope. If the MOD, as an employer, can legislate its way out of a duty of care to our armed forces, where will that stop? Will other employers, such as the fire service or the police service, be next? Where will it end? As a Government Department, the MOD already enjoys Crown privilege, which means that, although health and safety legislation applies to it, it is not subject to criminal enforcement action in the courts. Instead, such action is mirrored by administrative arrangements, which ultimately lead to a Crown censure instead of prosecution.

Introducing a smokescreen of combat immunity over all military operations, as the Government propose, would be a huge step backwards. Combat immunity, which is currently interpreted by the courts, is there to protect military operations when thinking is impaired in the heat of battle. It does not, and should not, apply to procurement decisions made back at Whitehall when equipment that is procured for our troops turns out to be faulty or unsuitable.

The MOD has already tried and failed to extend the scope of combat immunity in the courts. The Supreme Court ruled in a landmark case that the Government are under a legal obligation to fulfil their duty of care and to ensure that British soldiers are sent to fight with adequate equipment and training. In that case, our troops were travelling in the lightly armoured Snatch Land Rover, the vulnerability of which had led some soldiers to call it the "mobile coffin". The Chilcot report eventually found that the Snatch Land Rover was at the end of its planned life in service and that an alternative should have been found.

That case defined the legal obligations that the Government owe to soldiers who are killed or injured on active service abroad. Why is the MOD now attempting to ignore the will of the highest court in the land? Under the system of blanket immunity that the MOD proposes, those facts would never have come to light, there would have been no pressure to make changes and no lessons would have been learned.

That brings me to the second concern put forward by the Secretary of State: that legal costs outstrip the compensation awarded. That assumes that people have a purely financial motive for taking cases through the courts, but their motivation is often more complex. Service personnel and their families do not simply seek financial recompense; they often seek justice. They seek to protect others from suffering the same fate as them or their loved ones. They want to shine a light on their case and ensure public scrutiny so that it does not happen again. They want questions answered.

Extending the scope of combat immunity would be discriminatory to armed forces personnel and their families, and would breach the armed forces covenant. The covenant's two principles are that,

"the armed forces community should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and that special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured or the bereaved."

The covenant is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society that they have served with their lives.

This is not how we in this country should respect those who risk their lives to protect our way of life. Why should a decision about equipment or training made at a desk in Whitehall not be subject to the same scrutiny as similar decisions made by other employers? In April last year the Defence Committee published its report, "Beyond endurance? Military exercises and the duty of care", which called for the MOD to be subject to sanctions under the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007, without exemption. The inquiry was called after three Army reservists died after taking part in SAS selection exercises in the Brecon Beacons. They were three of 135 armed forces personnel who lost their lives while on training and exercises between 1 January 2000 and 20 February 2016: a statistic to make us sit up and think.

The inquiry found that it was wrong for the MOD and armed forces to have exemptions under the Corporate Manslaughter and Homicide Act in situations where they have been penalised by Crown censure for serious failings in hazardous training and selection events. The Government, however, rejected the Committee's modest proposals to reform the military exemptions in the Corporate Manslaughter and Homicide Act. Why is the MOD so reluctant to accept responsibility for its actions? Do our brave men and women, who put themselves on the front line to protect our country, not deserve better?

I now turn specifically to the compensation awards under the new enhanced scheme. Before doing so, it is important to point out a flaw in the current system that takes no account of those who have suffered brain damage as a result of their injuries and lack capacity to make decisions or control large amounts of money. The MOD simply pays more than half a million pounds into a soldier's bank account with no checks currently on capacity. They are simply left to get on with it. Lawyers instructed in such cases are under a duty to assess mental capacity and are negligent if they fail to do so. That protects vulnerable claimants. No such checks and balances exist for military service personnel, so I ask the Minister to address that urgently.

The MOD's enhanced pension scheme should not be reviewed as an issue linked to the extension of combat immunity as the two issues are independent of each other. The Government say that individuals or their families will be awarded better compensation for injury or death in combat and will not require legal representation. Straightforward cases will be suitable for the compensation scheme, but using the scheme should be optional, with the decision taken to do so by armed forces personnel or their family. The option to go through the courts and the subsequent public scrutiny must remain open. Many cases will inevitably be very complex with a need for multiple experts to help to assess the extent of injuries and losses.

Service personnel are often vulnerable and traumatised, and some will have catastrophic injuries. In my constituency I have the South Manchester amputation unit, which I visit regularly and I have seen the extent of many of the injuries. Improvements in medical expertise mean that those who suffer battlefield injuries have extended life

[*Mike Kane*]

expectancy. The complex nature of the injuries, including the cost of adapted housing, equipment and rehabilitation to last a lifetime, has always been determined by experts and the courts, with independent legal advice available. The MOD now proposes to take those calculations away from the courts and instead handle them itself. Further, it expects injured and vulnerable military personnel to be able to assess themselves whether the correct amounts have been awarded. Does the Minister really expect vulnerable and injured service personnel and their families to navigate the process without legal representation? If the MOD is serious about full compensation, servicemen and women must have recourse to legal representation to help prepare the evidence for the courts to adjudicate.

However, the proposal will allow the MOD to create a situation in which it serves not only as gatekeeper, but as both judge and jury. The fact that the MOD itself should decide whether a claim against it is valid creates a clear conflict of interest. As a result, it is unlikely that armed forces personnel and their families will have confidence in the system or its impartiality.

In summary, the Government need to look again at the enhanced compensation scheme and the proposal to extend the definition of combat immunity. As it stands, soldiers will be shut out of justice, and military equipment failures will be swept under the carpet rather than receiving public scrutiny through the court system. I repeat my questions to the Minister: does he legally and morally believe that the MOD should be allowed to legislate its way out of its duty of care to our soldiers as set out in the armed forces covenant and in law? If the Minister proposes to extend combat immunity, when does he propose to put the primary legislation before Parliament?

The Government have stated that there is an urgent need to reform the current system for dealing with compensation claims. When, therefore, can we expect the conclusions of their urgent consultation? I am sure we can all agree in this place that any process of compensation for armed service personnel needs to be transparent, and that everybody needs to be accountable. The enhanced compensation scheme and proposed extension of combat immunity fails to deliver either. Our armed forces deserve better.

3.15 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) on securing this important debate this afternoon.

The hon. Gentleman made a cogent, reasoned and passionate speech about combat compensation, the changes that are likely to be made, and the suffering that service personnel and their families are likely to experience as a result of the Government's proposed changes. I agree with what he has said. I find it strange that, as he says, the MOD will end up being gatekeeper, judge and jury, especially in compensation claims, and that there has been no real attempt by the Government so far to say when, how and if they are going to do away with their legal duty of care towards service personnel. We all owe

them so much. As has already been said, much has come to light because of the fact that combat immunity was not quite so widely drawn.

If the Scottish Government's Minister for veterans was involved in this matter, he would be seriously concerned. So many service personnel who have been affected by what has happened to them, and of course to their families, might not now be able to get unbiased and free access to compensation. That is really dangerous, especially for those who suffer mental health problems as a result of their service. As we know, sometimes such problems do not occur until many years after service has ended.

The Scottish Government urge the UK Government to publish a response to the latest quinquennial review as soon as possible and to address directly the review's recommendations. In particular, we urge the Government to increase the maximum tariffs for mental health and to improve communication, particularly for veterans who may experience late onset symptoms.

The Scottish Government welcome the launch of the "Defence people mental health and wellbeing strategy" as a positive step forward, but maintain that there is still much more that could be done. For example, if people receive compensation as a result of their service, that should not be allowed to affect any other benefits that they get. It is vital that we treat our veterans with the utmost dignity and respect and allow them free, fair and equitable access.

The Government must not try to do in private what has recently been done in public, because that has forced the MOD to look at its procedures and at how it carries out its procurement and training methodologies. Service personnel need the utmost respect from the Government and the best possible compensation when things that the MOD is responsible for go wrong.

3.19 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. To be honest, I was not best pleased when I realised that I had to come to this sitting of Westminster Hall, right at the end of a parliamentary term, but when I realised what issue was to be considered, my attitude soon changed. We owe a great deal of gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) for bringing this extremely important issue forward and securing the debate.

All of us here today would agree that we want the best and most appropriate compensation for all those who deserve compensation, whether they are soldiers or other members of the armed forces who have been hurt, or members of their families. We want justice for everyone, and we want it to be done as quickly and expeditiously as possible. I expect we are all concerned about the lengthy delays in some court cases, because we want justice to be achieved as quickly as possible.

I have two profound concerns about the proposals that the Government sent out for consultation. The consultation period has concluded and I shall be interested to hear what they intend to do in the light of the responses—whether they intend to legislate, and what form that legislation will take.

My first concern is quite fundamental, and it is about combat liability. Who exactly would be entitled to put forward a claim for compensation? The consultation paper suggested a new definition of liability:

“We believe that the test should be whether the harm—*injury or death*—occurred in the course of a UK military operation as a result of direct or indirect hostile enemy action, or as the direct result of misdirected targeting by friendly forces, or as the direct result of action taken to avoid hostile enemy action. If it did, it should be regarded as occurring in combat.”

That might on the face of it seem to be a straightforward, common-sense definition of combat, but its implications are truly profound, and it flies in the face of the practice and legal precedent established in this country since at least the end of the second world war. The suggested definition would mean that the Ministry of Defence could not be held accountable for decisions made far from combat, including those concerning training, procurement and the suitability of future combat equipment in the light of known operational issues. All those issues would be excluded under the proposal.

The practical implications of that are huge. An example that has already been quoted is the case brought with regard to Snatch Land Rovers. It was a long legal case, pursued against the Ministry of Defence by the families of soldiers who lost their lives in those inadequate vehicles in Iraq. In the end, it was successful in securing compensation and, more importantly, in gaining public recognition of the fact that the vehicles were inadequate. They were replaced with better, more sustainable vehicles that provided better protection for soldiers, but there were also lessons that had to be learned. The deficiencies of the Snatch vehicles were identified previously in Northern Ireland but, for reasons best known to civil servants and politicians at the time, action was not taken to replace them with appropriate vehicles. Those issues came to light clearly in the court case, which was long and protracted but extremely thorough. Of course, reference was made to all that in the Chilcot report, which I think should be considered alongside the Government proposal.

My second concern is that the proposal flies in the face of established legal practice based on common law, because it would take away people’s legal rights. It sets out, essentially, an in-house Ministry of Defence system, under which people would not have their legal rights or legal representation, but would accept what was decided by the Ministry. Admittedly, there would be an independent opinion about the entitlement.

I consider the proposal to be extremely worrying, and although I am a lay person, I am not the only one saying that. Lawyers with enormous experience are also concerned about it. The president of the Law Society said:

“This means cases would not be heard by an independent judge, facts would not be independently investigated, responsibility would not be established and a state institution, if liable, would not be held to account.

Soldiers and their families must not be shut out of our justice system.”

That, in a nutshell, is my second reservation.

In the light of those points, I hope that the Government will have second thoughts and listen to the Law Society and the many other people who have made representations. I also hope that the Government will uphold the consensus that was accepted by all parties on the armed forces covenant and take it forward, both in its detail and in its spirit, and that they will continue to have the principle of the duty of care for all armed forces personnel foremost in their mind whenever they consider bringing

forward proposals. With those few words about my strong reservations, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East for securing the debate and look forward to hearing the Government response.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I welcome this debate, secured by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). He said that it was the graveyard shift: it is the last day of term, and I am already on my feet to respond to a debate that could have lasted an hour and a half. However, the subject is important, and I am grateful for this opportunity to respond as I begin my work in my present portfolio.

The hon. Gentleman made some very kind initial comments about what happened in the Westminster bridge attack. As this is the last sitting day before the recess, I think we are all reflecting on what has been a dramatic and difficult year for Britain, with the terrorist attacks and the Grenfell Tower fire. I feel humbled by the hon. Gentleman’s comments. It was a difficult day for me, and not a day goes by when I do not think about PC Keith Palmer. The toughest part of the day for me after that was going home and finding my eight-year-old boy at the top of the stairs, unable to sleep and wanting explanations of what had happened that day. All I could offer was that there are occasionally very bad people who do very bad things, but that there are always very good people who, even more, do good things. That day I was one of a number of people trying to do a good thing.

A lot of detail has arisen in the debate, and many questions have been asked. I shall do my best to answer the questions, but if I miss any details I shall, if I may, do as I customarily do and write to hon. Members. I do not have the excuse of not having enough time to answer; it is just that the portfolio is new to me, and I will say frankly that the issue is complex. However, as a former regular soldier and as a reservist—something that I should declare—I have a personal interest in making sure that when we send our brave soldiers, sailors and air personnel into harm’s way, we give them the equipment that they require.

I am grateful for the opportunity to elaborate on the Government’s proposals for better compensation. Before I turn to the details, it is worth saying something about the consultation paper, but also, in view of what has been said, rehearsing the rationale for the steps proposed for the consultation paper itself. There could hardly be a more important responsibility for the Ministry of Defence than ensuring that our arrangements for providing financial compensation to people who are injured while fighting for their country, and the families of those who are killed in so doing, are not only fair but generous. We owe them nothing less.

There are currently two routes by which service personnel or their families may be paid compensation for deaths or injuries suffered in that way. Virtually any injury, whether fatal or not, that is sustained by a member of the armed forces as a result of service will attract a payment under the armed forces compensation scheme. The scheme applies to deaths and injuries sustained both in combat and in situations such as training, and whether or not the Ministry of Defence was at fault in

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

any way in the incident concerned. In a relatively small number of cases, a second route to seeking compensation would involve suing the Ministry of Defence for negligence in the law courts. That is because, were a court to find that there was negligence, it would award compensation that would be expected to be higher than that under the armed forces compensation scheme. In practice, the MOD would normally settle a case if it believed that it had been totally or partially to blame. It is fair to say that few cases actually go all the way to trial.

In the main, the MOD has no difficulty with the current approach, and we are not proposing any change whatsoever in cases that do not relate to combat. That distinction is important; I do not think the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East made the distinction in his opening remarks between cases that are in combat and those that are not. If people believe that they have a case, they may sue the MOD, and the Department will normally settle the case if it believes that it was indeed totally or partially to blame.

The real problem with the court route is when it comes to combat. Combat is inherently dangerous—we are sending people into harm's way to use organised violence. That was why the courts developed a doctrine known as combat immunity, which means that the Government cannot be sued for negligence when a person is injured or killed as a result of being sent into combat. The Ministry of Defence will continue to do everything practicable to minimise casualties among members of Britain's armed forces when they are called on to fight, but armed hostilities cannot be treated in the same way as training incidents or accidents in civilian life. I hope hon. Members understand and recognise that distinction, which I think is agreed across all parties.

Mike Kane: The Minister will know that the armed forces compensation scheme is limited in scope and does not take into account the rehabilitation costs of members of the armed forces who have been injured. We need to keep the court system so that they can get full compensation for the lifetime's worth of injuries that they have to face.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will come on to that in a second. Given that I have some time, it is worth saying that I have just been at a two-day conference with Veterans' Ministers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, where we discussed that very thing: what support, compensation and packages of measures are available and in place while people are in the service, going through the transition, and once they are veterans. I think that is the point the hon. Gentleman is alluding to, and I will come to that shortly.

The challenge we face is that the scope of the doctrine of combat immunity is complex and unclear. That has resulted in some exceptionally protracted claims alleging that the MOD should not have used certain kinds of equipment or transport or should have trained people in a different way. The strong view of the Government is that decisions about such challenging and sensitive matters should be taken by military commanders with the appropriate expertise, and not—with all respect—by the courts.

Indeed, one of the minority judges in the Supreme Court case I mentioned rightly warned that the decision could lead to “the judicialisation of war”. The result

has been a number of long-running cases in which the MOD has been forced to defend its military preparations in the lead-up to combat. Such cases have risked the exposure of sensitive material, which could be useful to our enemies and adversaries. They have also cost large amounts of taxpayers' money, which could have been spent in better ways. We believe the cases have been highly stressful for the litigants and created much uncertainty for the conduct of future hostilities.

What we cannot have is cases where commanders in a war might be concerned about the manner in which they make decisions for fear of litigation or lawsuits when they come home. Military commanders may come to feel that they will be second-guessed back in Britain by lawyers intent on mounting negligence cases. That could have a chilling effect on decision making and affect our ability to fight and complete actions. Against that background, the proposals we put forward in our consultation paper offered a solution, which we believe will generously meet the needs of any service casualties in future conflicts and their families but also benefit the operational effectiveness of the armed forces.

Mike Kane: As I said in my speech, it was my understanding that no court decision has ever second-guessed a military decision in the theatre.

Mr Ellwood: I will confirm that is the case. What I am saying is that we would not want any officer, commander or non-commissioned officer to be concerned about such a consideration. However, I hear what the hon. Gentleman says.

We have suggested that in future, whenever a member of the armed forces is killed or injured in combat, compensation will be paid at the rate a court would have been likely to award if it had found the MOD to have been negligent, regardless of whether it has indeed been negligent. The amount will be assessed independently—that was a concern the hon. Gentleman had—by an experienced, qualified lawyer. For the claimant, that will mean that there will be no need to spend years engaged in complex legal battles, with no certainty of success, seeking to prove that the MOD has been negligent in law.

Wayne David: Rather than excluding claimants in their best interests, would it not be better for there to be a choice on whether to pursue the case through the route suggested, with the MOD, or to take independent legal advice?

Mr Ellwood: One of the purposes of the consultation is to simplify the system. We need a robust system that everybody is able to follow and that is clearcut for both sides.

For the Government, the new system will mean increased expenditure on compensation for death or injury sustained in the most challenging conditions. They will be paying higher sums in cases in which the MOD has not been negligent, but that will be offset to a large extent by a reduction in the costs of litigation. The Government would prefer to spend taxpayers' money directly on compensation for the armed forces rather than on legal fees. I think everyone would agree with that.

Mike Kane: I have two points on that. First, to whom would the lawyer be accountable and who would employ them? Secondly, if the MOD had admitted its negligence and settled the Snatch Land Rover vehicle case, it would not have run up so much expenditure on the legal case.

Mr Ellwood: It is because of such cases that we are now having to provide this compensation. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that no court has ever second-guessed a military decision, but the Supreme Court's judgment opened up the prospect of precisely what is happening and what might happen in future cases.

The corollary to the proposal is that any cases covered by the new, more generous compensation rules can no longer be heard by the courts. That will mean that complex issues of military planning will be decided upon by members of our armed forces with the appropriate experience and not by the courts themselves, as the Government believe is right and proper. The Government therefore believe that our proposals will benefit members of our armed forces involved in future conflicts, their families and the country as a whole, and we launched our consultation paper on that basis last autumn. At the same time as publishing the proposals for future cases, we offered to settle the current cases to which I referred. I am pleased that a number of those offers were accepted.

There were more than 500 responses to the consultation, and it is fair to say that the majority were broadly positive. However, respondents made a number of points that the Government are considering, and in some cases looking at very carefully indeed. For example, some suggested that claimants should be able to choose between the new scheme and the traditional court route. However, as I said earlier, that would be difficult for the Government to accept, because it would perpetuate legal uncertainty and the problem of the judicialisation of war. Some expressed concern about the independence of the assessors, and we are considering how best to demonstrate that they will indeed be totally independent in making their decisions. Some wanted assurance that mental injuries suffered in combat, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, would be covered as generously as physical injuries. The Government completely agree with that point of view.

Mike Kane: Part of the nub of the matter is how those independent assessors will be independent if they are appointed by the Ministry of Defence. Do we not already have an independent assessor system in judges?

Mr Ellwood: I think there has to be some faith given to the fact that, when we make those appointments, we choose based on independence. I will look at that process and confirm that. I think we are getting into the weeds a little bit by talking about the confirmation of the independence of those who will make the decisions.

Finally, some suggested that, by removing such combat cases from the courts, an opportunity to prevent any recurrence would be lost. The Government disagree with that argument, because the adversarial nature of litigation makes it an unsatisfactory way of learning lessons. I think we would all agree with that. When a member of the UK armed forces has been killed in combat, a full inquest will always be held. When there has been a non-fatal injury of any significance, there

will be a service inquiry. I believe that those non-adversarial inquiries will get to the heart of what happened far more quickly than any civil litigation.

The consultation confirmed the Government's view that our proposals are fair and just, both for the taxpayer and for those who are killed or injured in combat and their loved ones. However, I must make it clear that we were disappointed that the Labour party's manifesto expressed itself against the proposal, which, in the current political circumstances, is a matter of some significance.

Wayne David: Will the Minister take an intervention on that point?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, if the hon. Gentleman will be helpful and say that he might be reconsidering.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I do not think that interventions necessarily have to be helpful.

Wayne David: I am so pleased you said that, Mr Gapes. I was not going to introduce party politics into the debate, but as the Minister has done so, I want to make it absolutely clear that the Opposition want fairness and transparency, but that we also recognise that we live in a parliamentary democracy in which the rule of law is a cornerstone. I understand the operational necessities of conflict, but it is important that we always bear that in mind.

Mr Ellwood: I think it is probably too late to amend the armed forces Bill, which is passing through the House of Lords as we speak, but maybe if the hon. Gentleman and I have a quiet coffee, we will find there is some compromise to be had. I hope he would agree that the thrust of the consultation and the Government's proposals make sense, but I am happy to discuss them with him in more detail if he is minded to do so. We certainly believe that the arguments for making these changes are compelling, and we will announce how we intend to proceed as soon as possible. Of course, we can do that even earlier if Labour Members are inclined to support the proposals.

3.44 pm

Mike Kane: There is a scientific law known as Graham's law, which says that gaseous material expands to fill the room. In the graveyard shift, with four contributions, we have gone on for quite some time and explored these very important issues in great detail. We are beginning to get some more clarity about the Government's thinking.

I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). We often spar in this place over education issues, and it is rare that we agree on so many things, but I thought she spoke extraordinarily eloquently. She highlighted the issue of veterans with mental health issues. My concern is that the compensation scheme currently pays out but does not look at the long-term health implications for people who need adaptations, equipment and generally help to live. She rightly said that we look for the best possible compensation package.

My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), always speaks so eloquently. He talked about having the best and most appropriate possible compensation for armed services personnel

[*Mike Kane*]

and their families. He particularly highlighted issues around liability and said that fairness and transparency should be at the heart of the system.

The Minister gave his own extraordinary personal testimony in the light of the death of Keith Palmer. That will stay with him for the rest of his life. I wish him the best, along with his family and children, who he mentioned and who will grow up with that incident. He is in my thoughts and prayers.

The Minister promised to write to me on some of the finer details. Is it correct that primary legislation will be needed to introduce this system? When are the Government thinking of introducing that? I am glad that he praised the Labour manifesto; that was very courteous of him.

At the moment, there is a point of division between us. It would be great if the Front-Bench teams could go for coffee at some stage and reach some unanimity, but currently we stand divided, and we will have to see how this plays out in the weeks and months ahead. I am grateful to the Minister for his courteous and reflective response, to the other Members who have contributed and, as ever, to you for your chairmanship, Mr Gapes.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government proposals for better combat compensation.

3.48 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 10 July 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Environmental Council: June

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): I attended the EU Environment Council in Luxembourg on 19 June along with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey).

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed. *The Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR) and Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry Regulation (LULUCF)*

The Maltese presidency introduced an exchange of views on these two regulations which, alongside the EU emissions trading system, will implement the EU's 2030 emissions reduction target under the Paris agreement. On the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), views were sought on the idea of a safety reserve put forward by the presidency to address concerns from some member states on the starting point for the 2021-2030 emissions trajectory. On the Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) regulation, views were sought on how to account for forest reference levels. Member state views remain divided on the best way to balance fairness, environmental integrity and cost efficiency across the dossiers. However, delegations reiterated the importance of making progress in order to reach agreement at October's Environment Council. This in turn would help reinforce EU climate leadership ahead of the next UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the parties in November.

On both dossiers, the UK spoke in support of the Commission's original proposals, highlighting the importance of environmental integrity and appropriate flexibility, but recognised the concerns of other member states and indicated a willingness to work constructively with others to reach an agreement. On the ESR, the UK noted some concerns with the current design of the proposed safety reserve, but was open to it in principle. On LULUCF, we spoke alongside several other member states in expressing a preference for forest reference levels to be based on historic policies, to help ensure biomass emissions are fully reflected in LULUCF accounting.

US decision to withdraw from the Paris agreement

Environment Ministers debated the United States' announcement of its intention to withdraw from the Paris agreement, noting that the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) had adopted Council conclusions on the same subject earlier in the day. There was full support of the FAC position, with many member states, including the UK expressing deep regret at the US decision and reaffirming that the Paris agreement cannot be renegotiated. While underscoring that the Paris agreement was irreversible, the UK also noted that the EU should leave the door open for the US to review its decision.

The Netherlands called on member states to provide funding to make up the shortfall in funding to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the UK, along with other member states, responded positively towards this suggestion.

EU Action Plan for Nature, People and the Economy

Council adopted Council conclusions on the Action Plan, which seeks to improve the practical implementation of the habitats and birds directive and boost their contribution towards reaching the EU's biodiversity targets for 2020.

AOB items

AOB—waste package—state of play

The presidency updated Council on the waste (circular economy) package. Many member states, UK included, noted that further discussion on the file would be welcome, particularly on the achievability of targets across all member states. The UK highlighted the variance of current municipal recycling rates across England, the challenge faced in urban areas and recognised the success in Wales.

AOB—urban adaptation plans for cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants in Poland—Information

The Polish delegation presented information on the climate implications of their urban adaptation plans.

AOB—Member state ratification of the Kigali amendment to the Montreal protocol—information

The Commission presented information on the Kigali amendment to the Montreal protocol.

AOB—Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conferences of the Parties—information

The presidency and the Commission together updated the Council on the outcomes of the international meeting on the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions.

AOB—Role of women in mountain regions—information

The Austrian delegation presented information on the role of women in mountain regions.

AOB—UN oceans conference—information

The Swedish delegation presented information on the outcome of the UN oceans conference.

AOB—11th Nano-authorities dialogue—information

The Luxembourg, Austrian and German delegations together presented information on the recommendations adopted at the 11th Nano-authorities dialogue.

AOB—Estonian presidency work programme—information

The incoming Estonian presidency set out the Council work programme for the next six months.

[HCWS33]

EDUCATION

Teacher Update

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): The 27th report of the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) is being published today. Its recommendations cover the remit that I issued in October 2016. The report contains recommendations on the pay award for teachers that is due to be implemented from September 2017, which are consistent with the Government's 1% public

sector pay policy. Copies of the STRB's 27th report are available in the Vote Office, the Printed Paper Office and the Libraries of the House, and online at www.gov.uk.

The STRB has recommended an uplift of 1 % to the minima and maxima of all pay ranges and allowances in the national pay framework, other than the minimum and maximum of the main pay range, to which they have recommended a 2% uplift. Following previous reforms, schools already have significant flexibility, within the pay ranges, to set pay for individual teachers, taking account of performance and retention. Nevertheless, those at the bottom of the main pay scale will receive an automatic 2% increase, a small proportion of teachers. As such it is consistent with the Government's public sector 1 % pay policy.

A full list of the recommendations is attached as an annex.

My officials will write to all of the statutory consultees of the STRB to invite them to contribute to a consultation on my acceptance of these recommendations and on a revised "School Teachers' Pay and Conditions" document and pay order. The consultation will last for three weeks.

I am grateful to the STRB for these recommendations and, subject to the views of consultees, I intend to accept all the key recommendations.

My detailed response contains further information on these matters.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-10/HCWS34/>.

[HCWS34]

Written Statements

Tuesday 11 July 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Members' Correspondence

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I am today publishing a report on the performance of Departments and Agencies on handling correspondence from Members and Peers during the calendar year 2016. Details are set out in the attachment below. Correspondence statistics for 2015 can be found on 21 July 2016, Volume 613 (HCWS118).

Departmental figures are based on substantive replies unless otherwise indicated. The footnotes to the table provide general background information on how the figures have been compiled.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-11/HCWS35/>

Correspondence Table 2016 (Correspondence Table 2016.doc)

[HCWS35]

TREASURY

ECOFIN: 11 July 2017

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 11 July 2017. The UK will be represented by Sir Tim Barrow, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the European Union. European Finance Ministers will discuss the following items:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief Ministers on the outcomes of the 10 July meeting of the Eurogroup, and Ministers will discuss the current economic situation.

Current financial service legislative proposals

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Mandatory disclosure rules

The Commission will give a presentation on the proposal for a Council directive amending directive regarding the mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation in relation to reportable cross-border arrangements.

Presentation of the work programme of the Estonian presidency

The new Estonian presidency of the Council of the European Union will present its work programme for the next six-month period. The Council will exchange views on the work programme.

Commission mid-term review of the capital markets union action plan

The Council will be asked to endorse Council conclusions on the mid-term review of the capital markets union action plan.

Non-performing loans

ECOFIN will hold an exchange of views on policy responses to the non-performing loans situation. The Council will also be asked to endorse Council conclusions.

[HCWS36]

DEFENCE

Chemical Weapons Convention

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence (Mark Lancaster): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State in the House of Lords (The Earl Howe) has made the following written statement:

The Defence Minister for the House of Lords, Lord Howe: The UK's chemical protection programme is designed to protect against the use of chemical weapons. Such a programme is permitted by the chemical weapons convention, with which the United Kingdom are fully compliant. Under the terms of the convention, we are required to provide information annually to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. In accordance with the Government's commitment to openness, I am placing a copy of the summary that has been provided to the Organisation outlining the UK's chemical protection programme in 2016 in the Library of the House.

[HCWS37]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Finances

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): In my statement to the House on 3 July, I made it clear that the UK Government will always uphold their ultimate responsibilities for political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland. With that in mind, I have been keeping under review the financial situation in Northern Ireland absent an Executive. Having reflected on the situation, and following further advice from the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, I have concluded that it will be necessary for me to provide additional clarity ahead of the summer recess to support Northern Ireland permanent secretaries in addressing financial pressures and maintaining public services. Following the public holidays in Northern Ireland this week, I therefore, intend to lay a further written statement before the House next week with adjusted indicative budget positions and departmental allocations. This will take account of the Barnett consequentials arising from the spring Budget, and funding as may be available from budget transfers and updated forecasts.

[HCWS38]

Written Statements

Wednesday 12 July 2017

TREASURY

NHS Technology

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Lord O'Shaughnessy) has made the following written statement in the House of Lords:

I am today publishing the Government response to the public consultation on the National Data Guardian for Health and Care's (NDG) and Care Quality Commission's (CQC) data security reviews. A copy of the response is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/new-data-security-standards-for-health-and-social-care>

Boosting cyber resilience, improving the response to data and cyber incidents and providing clarity on the handling of personal data remain an urgent priority for the health and care sector.

Following consultation which closed on 7 July 2016, the Government accept the recommendations from the two independent data security reviews published in 2016.

Through the consultation, we heard broad support for Dame Fiona Caldicott's recommended data security standards and opt-out model, alongside a clear message that we need to carefully think through and approach all elements of implementation. Other key themes in the responses to the consultation related to the need to build public trust through providing clarity and communicating clearly with the public and professionals.

The global WannaCry ransomware attack in May 2017, which affected many other countries' services as well as our own health and care system, has reaffirmed the potential for data and cyber incidents to impact directly on patient care, as well as the need for our health and care system to act decisively to minimise the impact on essential frontline services.

The Government response includes wide-ranging plans to strengthen organisations across the NHS and social care against the threat of global cyber-attacks.

The immediate and longer-term actions are centred on ensuring local organisations are implementing the 10 data security standards proposed in the NDG review, supported by the national cyber support services provided by NHS Digital, backed up by clear contractual obligations, and by assurance and regulatory action.

Investment in data and cyber security will be boosted above £50 million and will include a new £21 million capital fund which will increase the cyber resilience of major trauma sites.

NHS Digital is already supporting local organisations by broadcasting alerts about cyber threats, providing a hotline for dealing with incidents, sharing best practice across the health and care system and carrying out on-site assessments to mitigate against cyber-attacks.

The NHS contract now requires NHS organisations to implement and adopt data security standards as recommended by the independent NDG for Health and Care.

Chief executives will also be held to account for standards that are being implemented and maintained and this will be assessed during inspections by the Care Quality Commission from September this year.

The Government's response also includes steps to give patients and the public more access to, and control over, their personal data while building confidence in the importance of secure data to provide better individual care and treatment, as well as supporting research and planning across the health system.

As the chief medical officer's recent report on genomics showed, better use of data and technology has the power to improve health outcomes, deliver better patient experience, transform the quality of care patients receive and support improvements across the health and social care system—now and in the future. Staff and patients will benefit from reduced bureaucracy, freeing up more time for patient care, and leading to more accurate diagnoses and more personalised treatment.

I want to thank Dame Fiona Caldicott, her team and the Care Quality Commission for their important and considered reviews and recommendations, which can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-data-security-consent-and-opt-outs>

<http://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/themed-work/safe-data-safe-care>

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-12/HCWS40/>

[HCWS40]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Extremism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am today announcing the main findings of the Home Office's internal review into the nature, scale and origin of the funding of Islamist extremist activity in the UK, including any overseas sources. The review was commissioned by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, on 30 November 2015. It gives us the best picture we have ever had of how extremists operating in the UK sustain their activities. The review did not include either the funding of terrorism, which is a better understood area, or the funding of extremism overseas from UK sources.

Having taken advice, I have decided against publishing the classified report produced during the review in full. This is because of the volume of personal information it contains and for national security reasons. We will be inviting Privy Counsellors from the Opposition parties to the Home Office to have access to classified report on Privy Council terms.

The main finding of the review is as follows:

The most common source of support for Islamist extremist organisations in the UK is from small, anonymous public donations, with the majority of these donations most likely coming from UK-based individuals. In some cases these organisations receive hundreds of thousands of pounds a year. This is the main source of their income. Those giving may not know or support the organisations' full agenda.

The review also made the following findings:

Some Islamic organisations of extremist concern portray themselves as charities to increase their credibility and to take advantage of Islam's emphasis on charity. Some are purposefully vague about their activities and their charitable status.

Regulation can be effective in improving transparency. There is some evidence of organisations of extremist concern seeking to avoid regulatory oversight.

For a small number of organisations with which there are extremism concerns, overseas funding is a significant source of income. However, for the vast majority of extremist groups in the UK, overseas funding is not a significant source.

Overseas support has allowed individuals to study at institutions that teach deeply conservative forms of Islam and provide highly socially conservative literature and preachers to the UK's Islamic institutions. Some of these individuals have since become of extremist concern.

Fundamentally, no single measure will tackle all the issues of concern raised in the review. A comprehensive approach focused particularly on domestic sources of support for all forms of extremism is needed. The Government have looked carefully at the review's findings and will build on existing work by:

Continuing to deliver public awareness campaigns to encourage people to understand the full aims of the organisations that they give to, reducing the amount of funding organisations of extremist concern are able to raise from the public in the UK.

Raising awareness across the financial services sector and grant making trusts and foundations of extremism

concerns. These organisations have an interest in ensuring they are not inadvertently supporting extremist individuals or organisations.

Reducing the ability of organisations of extremist concern to avoid official scrutiny by increasing the proportion of organisations subject to regulatory oversight. We are strengthening our work with the Charity Commission, which includes addressing the abuse of charities for terrorist or extremist purposes as one of its strategic priorities.

The Charity Commission will be introducing a requirement on charities to declare overseas funding sources. The Commission has been discussing this issue with charities over recent months.

Directly raising issues of concern, supported by evidence, with specific countries as part of our wider international engagement on countering extremism and violent extremism.

[HCWS39]

Written Statements

Thursday 13 July 2017

TREASURY

Finance Bill

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Finance Bill introduced in March 2017 provided for a number of changes to tax legislation that were withdrawn from the Bill after the calling of the general election. The then Financial Secretary to the Treasury confirmed at the point they were withdrawn that there was no policy change and that these provisions would be legislated for at the first opportunity in the new Parliament.

The Government confirm that intention. They expect to introduce a Finance Bill as soon as possible after the summer recess containing the withdrawn provisions. Where policies have been announced as applying from the start of the 2017-18 tax year or other point before the introduction of the forthcoming Finance Bill, there is no change of policy and these dates of application will be retained. Those affected by the provisions should continue to assume that they will apply as originally announced.

The Finance Bill to be introduced will legislate for policies that have already been announced. In the case of some provisions that will apply from a time before the Bill is introduced, technical adjustments and additions to the versions contained in the March Bill will be made on introduction to ensure that they function as intended. To maximise certainty about the exact provisions that will apply, the Government are today publishing updated draft provisions.

The Finance Bill will include legislation for the Making Tax Digital (MTD) programme. Having listened carefully to the concerns raised by the Treasury Committee, parliamentarians and stakeholders, the Government are announcing policy changes that will be reflected in the legislation to be introduced. Businesses will not be mandated to use the MTD system until April 2019 and then only to meet VAT obligations. This will apply to businesses with turnover above the VAT threshold. Businesses with turnover below the VAT threshold will not be required to use the system but can choose to do so. Businesses will also be able to opt in for other taxes, benefiting from a streamlined, digital experience.

The Government will not widen the scope of MTD beyond VAT before the system has been shown to work well, and not before April 2020 at the earliest. This will ensure that there is time to test the system fully and for digital record keeping to become more widespread.

[HCWS47]

Fiscal Risks Report

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has today published its first fiscal risks report (FRR). The report highlights that although the Government have made significant progress in reducing the deficit, debt remains high leaving the economy and public finances vulnerable

in the event of shocks. The FRR fulfils the OBR's legal obligation to publish a statement setting out the main risks to the public finances at least once every two years. It was laid before Parliament earlier today and copies are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office.

The Government welcome this first FRR which keeps the UK at the frontier of fiscal practice worldwide. The establishment of the OBR has ensured that policy is made on an unbiased view of future prospects, improving confidence in the fiscal forecasts, and the publication of this report represents a significant further step taken by this Government to enhance fiscal transparency and management. This Government's commitment to fiscal openness was recognised by the IMF in its 2016 fiscal transparency evaluation which found the UK to be "at the forefront of fiscal reporting practices worldwide". The publication of the FRR today addresses one of the recommendations of that evaluation as well as the findings of recent NAO reports on risks to the public finances. The Government will respond formally to the FRR within the next year, as required under the Charter for Budget Responsibility.

Over the past seven years, the Government have taken important steps to reduce the UK's exposure to fiscal risks. The 2008 crisis was a dramatic illustration of the danger of ignoring potential threats to the public finances. Since 2010, the Government have reduced the country's exposure to fiscal risks through cutting the deficit by three-quarters from its post-war high of 9.9% of GDP, while protecting public services and delivering improved outcomes across health, education and policing and overseen record levels of employment, with over 2.9 million more people into work. The Government have also delivered far reaching reforms to financial supervision which has significantly reduced the likelihood and impact of financial instability. Today, the Government are announcing a new approval regime for Government guarantees and other contingent liabilities representing a further enhancement to the UK's public expenditure control framework which the IMF and other international commentators recognise as being one of the strongest in the world.

Despite this progress, the OBR's report shows that the UK's fiscal position remains vulnerable. The legacy of the great recession remains, with debt forecast to peak this year at almost 90% of GDP—its highest level in 50 years. The unprecedented deficit that the Government inherited in 2010, which the Government have been cutting since 2010, and which saw us spend £4 for every £3 we raised in tax, is the cause of the rapid increase in debt. This report examines a broad spectrum of risks, and illustrates the potential impact on the public finances of a number of these risks materialising at the same time through an innovative "fiscal stress test". Failing to have a credible plan to get the debt down would expose the UK to greater risk, which could have devastating consequences for our public services in the event of a new shock. The report also highlights risks from an ageing society and the erosion of tax bases.

That is why the Government remain determined to learn the lessons of the past and bolster the UK's fiscal resilience. The Government's fiscal rules are designed to guide the public finances back to balance at a pace sensitive to the needs of the economy. The structural deficit must be below 2% of GDP and debt must be falling as a share of GDP by 2020-21. The OBR forecasts

that the Government are on track to meet both of their fiscal targets and that debt will start falling as a share of GDP before the end of the decade. It is vitally important that we continue with our plan to get the debt to GDP ratio down to improve our resilience and address the risks highlighted by the report.

The Government are also working to ensure fiscal sustainability over the long term. The Government are taking important steps to enhance the UK's long-run productivity. Since 2010 there has been over a quarter of a trillion pounds of public and private investment in infrastructure. Looking ahead, the Government are investing more in economic infrastructure, innovation and housing through the £23 billion national productivity investment fund by 2021-22. They are also transforming technical education for 16 to 19-year-olds through the introduction of T-levels, increasing by over 50% the number of hours of training, and including a high-quality three-month work placement for every student, giving young people the technical skills they need to succeed in the world of work, and businesses the edge they need to compete in the global economy. Stronger growth through raising productivity is the only sustainable way to deliver economic resilience, higher real wages and increased living standards in the long run.

[HCWS46]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 17 and 18 July in Brussels.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be a presentation by the Commission on the state of play of the common fisheries policy and consultation on the fishing opportunities for 2018.

On agriculture, there will be a debrief on the outcome of the recent trilogue discussions concerning the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on organic production and labelling of organic products.

The Council will also exchange views on modernising and simplifying the common agricultural policy, implementation of the May 2015 Council conclusions, trade-related agricultural issues and wine labelling.

The Estonian presidency, whose presidency term commenced on 1 July, will present their six-month work programme to the Council.

There are currently 11 items scheduled under any other business:

A European One Health Action Plan against antimicrobial resistance (tabled by the Commission).

African swine fever: state of play (tabled by the Commission).

Symposium on the future of food in the EU (Brussels, 27 June 2017) (tabled by the Maltese, Slovak and Netherlands delegations).

The consequences of the mandatory food origin labelling on the internal market (tabled by the Belgian delegation).

Meeting on dual quality of foodstuffs (Bratislava, 30 May 2017) (tabled by the Slovak delegation).

Dual quality of foodstuffs—presentation of the latest study (tabled by the Czech delegation).

Meeting of the Ministers of agriculture of the Visegrad Group countries and Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia (Nadarzyn near Warsaw, 2 June 2017) (tabled by the Polish delegation).

Trade practices applied by third countries vis-a-vis EU-responsible EU member states (tabled by the Czech delegation).

International ministerial conference on “GMO free agriculture: a chance for rural development in Central and South Eastern Europe” (Vienna, 9-10 May 2017) (tabled by the Austrian delegation).

AU-EU agriculture ministerial conference on “Making Sustainable Agriculture a Future for Youth in Africa” (Rome, 2 July 2017) (tabled by the Commission).

Drought in Portugal (tabled by the Portuguese delegation).

Until exit negotiations are concluded, the UK remains a full member of the European Union and all the rights and obligations of EU membership remain in force. The outcome of these negotiations will determine what arrangements apply in relation to EU legislation in future once the UK has left the EU.

[HCWS42]

United Nations Ocean Conference

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I would like to update the House on the recent United Nations ocean conference, held in New York from 5 - 9 June. Although I was unable to attend due to the pre-election period Defra's deputy director for marine policy led the United Kingdom delegation. I wish to convey to the House the global importance of the conference and summarise its key outcomes.

The UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development, commonly referred to as SDGs or the UN 2030 agenda, are a collection of 17 goals that set the global environment and development agenda from 2016 to 2030. They cut across all areas of Government, from ending poverty and achieving gender equality through to tackling climate change and using resources sustainably.

The conference was an attempt to galvanise international action on the implementation of SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. This SDG tackles a range of marine issues such as marine pollution and ocean acidification.

It produced two major outcomes: a call for action and a registry of over 1300 voluntary commitments made by the global community to support the implementation of SDG14.

I am pleased to report that, through our statement to the conference, the UK Government were able to demonstrate our continued support for the SDG process. We recognise the delivery of SDG 14 has a particular significance for small island developing states and least developed countries and that we would continue to support the Commonwealth marine economies programme, in developing sustainable ocean economies, alleviating poverty, and mitigating the effects of climate change and environmental threats.

The UK Government statement noted that climate change and ocean acidification continue to be significant threats to the long term health of our oceans. We highlighted the major role the UK played in securing the Paris Agreement and reiterated our commitment to its implementation.

I am also pleased to report that, recognising the need to take action on pollution from land-based sources, including the increasing amount of plastics and micro-plastics, the UK was able to sign up to the UN environment clean seas campaign.

The expertise of our marine science industry was demonstrated through the successful ocean acidification event led by the UK.

The UK also made four voluntary commitments to support the implementation of SDG14, highlighting our work on marine protected areas, including in the overseas territories; marine science; marine litter and the Commonwealth marine economies programme. These can be viewed on the conference website at:

<https://oceanconference.un.org/commitments/>

The call for action was agreed by consensus at the conference although the United States dissociated itself from the language on the WTO and recalled the US administration position on the Paris Agreement. The call highlights particular action to be taken on a number of issues including: the need to increase scientific knowledge, prevention of pollution, in particular from plastics; delivering sustainable fisheries and improving access to market for small scale artisanal fisheries in developing countries; concluding negotiations in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on fishery subsidies; and encouraging active engagement in the discussions on the development of an international legally binding instrument on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. The call for action is available at:

<https://oceanconference.un.org/callforaction>

[HCWS44]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit: July Negotiating Round

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Next week the UK's negotiating team will travel to Brussels for the second round of talks, continuing our journey towards a new, deep and special partnership between the UK and the EU.

Today, in advance of those discussions, I am publishing three position papers that the UK negotiating team will discuss with our EU counterparts next week.

Ongoing Union judicial and administrative proceedings

The UK's departure from the EU will end the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in the UK. However, there will be cases before the CJEU that involve the UK as a party on the day of the UK's withdrawal, which by definition relate to the period when the UK was a member of the EU. These will need to be resolved satisfactorily as part of a smooth and orderly exit. A similar issue arises for EU administrative procedures involving the UK.

Nuclear safeguards and materials

The UK will withdraw from EURATOM when it leaves the EU. However, the UK and the EU have a strong mutual interest in continuing to co-operate on civil nuclear matters, harnessing shared expertise and maximising shared interests, for instance in nuclear research and development. As part of our orderly

withdrawal and to provide certainty to industry, it is therefore important the negotiating teams work through issues relating to nuclear materials and non-proliferation (safeguards).

Privileges and immunities

The UK recognises the need for certain privileges and immunities to apply for a limited period after exit, in order to allow the EU a reasonable time in which to wind up its current operations in the UK. Looking ahead to the deep and special partnership, the UK wants to put in place a legally acceptable framework of privileges and immunities that allows for the smooth conduct of relations between the UK and the EU.

In addition to discussing these and other technical withdrawal issues next week, the two negotiating teams will also focus on citizens' rights, the question of a financial settlement, and Northern Ireland and Ireland.

On citizens' rights, the Government's priority remains providing certainty as soon as possible to EU citizens living in the UK, and UK nationals in the EU. To that end, we will use next week's round to review the technical elements of the EU and UK proposals, identifying areas of alignment and those where further work is required by both parties.

On the financial settlement, as set out in the Prime Minister's letter to President Tusk, the Government have been clear that we will work with the EU to determine a fair settlement of the UK's rights and obligations as a departing member state, in accordance with the law and in the spirit of our continuing partnership. The Government recognise that the UK has obligations to the EU, and the EU obligations to the UK, that will survive the UK's withdrawal—and that these need to be resolved.

Finally, in June, I agreed with Michel Barnier to establish a dialogue on Northern Ireland and Ireland, which in recognition of its importance is led by the UK and EU co-ordinators. Both parties are committed to the Belfast agreement, avoiding a return to a hard border, ensuring that nothing is done that jeopardises the peace process, and preserving the common travel area and associated arrangements. Our focus next week will be on discussing how to ensure the preservation of the common travel area, and to restate our shared commitment to the Belfast agreement.

The position papers published today are available on the Government website, and I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government will publish further position papers on other issues in due course, providing more information to business and individuals, and informing our negotiations with the EU. In addition, the Government will publish technical notes shared with the EU, and may agree joint publications with the EU as part of the ongoing negotiations.

[HCWS43]

HEALTH

Ambulance Response Programme

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am today announcing the publication of the University of Sheffield report on the ambulance response programme and subsequent recommendations by Sir Bruce Keogh, NHS England's national medical director. The report

evaluates a series of pilots that I announced to the House in my written statement of 6 January 2015, intended to support ambulance services in England to maintain and improve clinical outcomes for patients in the face of unprecedented increases in demand. Copies of the report and Sir Bruce's recommendations are attached.

Based on the extensive evidence base detailed in the report, NHS England is proposing a new framework of ambulance performance standards and related operational changes that are focused on patients' clinical needs and will help the service to operate more efficiently. In particular:

- enabling ambulances to dispatch resources much more clearly based on the clinical needs of patients ensuring the consistent delivery of very rapid responses to those who genuinely need them, through putting in place a four tier response time based on the clinical needs of patients;

- introducing specific standards for stroke and heart attack, aimed at ensuring patients start the right treatment in hospital as quickly as possible;

- improving performance management of "tail" waits by introducing mean and 90th centile measures; and,

- achieving greater consistency and transparency for less urgent calls by bringing all response standards into a consistent national framework.

These ambulance response times are more stringent than anywhere else in the UK. Moreover, evidence from the pilots suggest that these changes will be beneficial for rural populations, narrowing the gap which currently exists in the time it takes for an ambulance resource to transport patients to hospital.

In my statement in January 2015 I said I would apply the following three tests before extending the ambulance response programme:

- there is clear clinical consensus that the proposed change will be beneficial to patient outcomes as a whole, and will act to reduce overall clinical risk in the system;

- there is evidence from the analysis of existing data and piloting that the proposed change will have the intended benefits, and is safe for patients; and,

- there is an associated increase in operational efficiency. The aim is to reduce the average number of vehicles allocated to each 999 call and the ambulance utilisation rate.

I have accepted Sir Bruce's advice that these tests have been met. I am authorising NHS England to implement the ambulance response programme recommendations in all ambulance services in England so that patients across the country will benefit from the improvements seen in the pilot ambulance services.

1. Report on Ambulance Response Programme (ARPReport_Final.pdf)

2. Letter with Sir Bruce Keogh's recommendations (13.7.17 Jeremy Hunt - Ambulance Response Programme letter.pdf)

The above documents can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-13/HCWS45/>.

[HCWS45]

TRANSPORT

Aviation Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):
In October 2016, the Government selected a new north-west runway at Heathrow as its preferred scheme for delivering new airport capacity in the south-east.

In February a consultation on a draft airports national policy statement was launched, which set out the reasons for this preference, along with the mitigation and compensation measures the Government expect the promoter to put in place if planning permission is to be granted.

The consultation closed on 25 May and the work to analyse the over 70,000 responses is progressing well. I would like to thank all of those who contributed their views.

The Government are fully committed to realising the benefits that a new northwest runway at Heathrow would bring, in terms of economic growth, boosting jobs and skills, strengthening domestic links and critically, increasing and developing our international connectivity as we prepare to leave the European Union.

The timing of the election, in particular the need to re-start a Select Committee inquiry into the draft airports NPS means we now expect to lay any final NPS in Parliament in the first half of 2018, for a vote in the House of Commons.

I will provide a further update to the House after the summer recess on our next steps following analysis of the consultation responses.

Today I am also publishing a response to the consultation held earlier this year on a new night flight regime for Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted. I am fully aware that noise is a major concern for those living near these airports, and that night noise is widely regarded as the most disturbing impact of aviation. While advances in new technology mean that aircraft are generally getting quieter, the limits governing night noise at these airports has not kept pace with these developments.

The new rules we are publishing today will encourage the use of quieter aircraft at all three airports by reducing the amount of noise these airports are legally allowed to make, and will give local residents a five year guarantee about the level of noise that they will be exposed to. This decision strikes a balance between managing the impacts on local communities by locking in the benefits offered by recent technological developments, with the economic benefits of night flights.

This decision should be seen as a signal that the Government take this issue very seriously, which is why we expect a ban on scheduled night flights of 6.5 hours at an expanded Heathrow. We will also explore whether there is more we can do, including considering further legislation to incentivise the industry more generally to invest in the quietest aircraft and operate them in the quietest way.

Strong international links are critical to the future prosperity of our country, with a world-class hub airport and thriving aviation sector central to this. We are committed to realising the economic and social benefits aviation has to offer, while taking seriously the need to balance this with managing the local and environmental impacts of aviation.

[HCWS41]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr David Gauke): In February this year, the Department for Work and Pensions published a Green Paper looking at

what more needs to be done to ensure consumer confidence and secure the future of defined benefit (final salary) pensions schemes.

Building on this Green Paper, the Department intends to publish a White Paper later this year which will set out proposed next steps on what reform is needed to support the sector. It will address the commitments in the Government's manifesto in relation to the regulation and rules governing defined benefit private pensions. The paper will also consider innovative delivery structures, such as consolidation and measures to drive efficiency within the sector.

While the sector is broadly working as intended, the White Paper will consider the need to evolve and adapt the regulatory regime to improve security for members.

With more than £1.5 trillion invested in these schemes, people need to have confidence that they are resilient and robustly regulated.

The Government wish to ensure that the defined benefit pensions system continues to balance the needs of consumers, the schemes themselves and business for the future.

Throughout the Green Paper process the Department has worked closely with a range of external stakeholders to develop sensible policy proposals. We are grateful to those who have contributed to the consultation and it is our strong intention that this collaboration should continue throughout the White Paper process.

[HCWS48]

Written Statements

Monday 17 July 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Electoral Commission Report on May 2016 Polls: Government Response

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government are today publishing their responses to the Electoral Commission's reports on the administration of the Mayor of London and London Assembly elections and the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections for 2016.

We have combined our response to the report on the London elections with the recommendations made in the reports of the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) where they are relevant to those polls.

Similarly, our response to the report on the PCC elections also incorporates relevant recommendations by the Royal National Institute for the Blind and the AEA. In addition, we have provided an annex of responses to additional AEA recommendations from their 2016 report that are not relevant to these polls.

Where recommendations by the Electoral Commission in its two reports are identical, they have been addressed in our response to the PCC election.

We are grateful for the recommendations produced by all these organisations and thank them for their work. These reports aid the Government in monitoring the effectiveness of electoral legislation; and help us to make improvements and identify future policy challenges and possible resolutions.

The Government will continue to work with these organisations, as well as electoral administrators and other partners, to improve our electoral system and ensure the effective running of elections. We will take these recommendations into account in implementing the recommendations of Sir Eric Pickles' review of electoral fraud published last year.

Copies of these Government responses will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS50]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Economy Act Commencement

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): In April this year, Her Majesty the Queen gave Royal Assent to the Digital Economy Act 2017. The Act introduced measures to help consumers access broadband, build digital infrastructure, protect children from online pornography and enable better public services using digital technologies.

A number of important provisions in the Act have already come into force. These include powers on broadband USO, switching, automatic compensation and information powers to help consumers accessing electronic communications services, protection for citizens from nuisance calls and others.

I can today inform the House that the Government have made the first commencement regulations to bring into force a considerable number of other sections of the Act.

We have taken steps to implement the new age verification requirement for online pornography as part of our continuing work to make the internet safer. The new scheme is complex and will not be fully in place until April 2018, but today we are bringing into force powers to designate the regulator and powers to allow guidance to be issued.

We are also bringing into force measures to improve digital connectivity across the UK, starting the implementation of the new electronic communications code to assist operators to develop new infrastructure, putting in place planning reforms and giving powers to allow Ofcom to make better use of radio spectrum to improve mobile connectivity.

We have also started the process of implementing the measures in the Act that allow the Government to make better use of data. Powers to allow HMRC to share non-identifying information in the public interest will come into force and help deliver more effective and efficient public services. We will also bring into force the information sharing arrangement with the Employers' Liability Tracing Office to help those who have suffered personal injury as a result of employment to trace liability insurance policies. New provisions to enable public authorities to share information with the UK Statistics Authority will also commence.

Finally, to help consumers better manage their bills, we will commence powers to require mobile operators to offer bill limits to all their customers. To allow operators time to adapt their systems and processes, I am today announcing that the requirement will come into force from October 2018.

Commencing these provisions marks another significant milestone towards implementing the Digital Economy Act 2017 and delivering our digital strategy.

[HCWS51]

NORTHERN IRELAND

National Security Arrangements: Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): This is a summary of the main findings from the report by His Honour Brian Barker QC, the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland, covering the period from June 2016 to 31 December 2016. His Honour Brian Barker concludes:

"I was appointed by the Secretary of State in May 2016. I have spent time obtaining an overview of institutions, personalities and problems. I have been fully briefed on the security situation. I received presentations from MI5 on the practical effect of co-operation and exchange of intelligence. My visits to various PSNI establishments and to MI5 left an impression of deep commitment and professionalism. Strong cross-border links continue with An Garda Siochana, resulting in effective co-operation and impressive disruption."

The aim of a more stable society, where the effect of local terrorism has a decreasing impact, seemed to have made some progress through 2016 despite a picture of continuing terrorist threat. It is clear, however, that police and prison officers face high risks both on and off duty. The context in which national security activities are performed have been described in the past as challenging, and continue to be so.

In preparing this report I have considered the current threat level, and what I have learned of events of a terrorist nature during the year. The number of shooting incidents related to the security situation for the 12 month period was 49, almost identical to that in 2015, while the number of bombing incidents, 27, was exactly half that recorded in 2015. There were six security/paramilitary related deaths in the period to December 31 2016. This was three times the number of the previous year.

The overall threat is real and enduring and broadly unchanged despite each recognisable group being somewhat disrupted and there being some relaxation of attitude in some communities. The exchange of intelligence and the evident co-operation between authorities continues to make inroads. As in recent years there have been successes and considerable effort devoted to containing and disrupting dissident groups. Nevertheless, planning and targeting continues and attacks occur. The threat from those released from custodial sentences and those given bail continue to present a challenge.

Dissident republican groupings remain interested and involved in criminality, organised crime, and money laundering. They express political purpose, either with conviction or because it is necessary so as to obscure criminality. Loyalist paramilitaries claim political allegiance, although the motivation of many is crime and control through intimidation and violence.

Throughout 2016 I met a range of stakeholders. Representatives of the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) and the Committee on Administration of Justice (CAJ) raised concerns about the use, control and reporting of covert human intelligence sources ("CHIS") and whether, for example, any CHIS were working without PSNI knowledge. This area that has been reviewed in the past and I will review it in the coming year in light of the new Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

My meeting with the NIPB's Independent Human Rights Advisor, Alyson Kilpatrick, fortified my predecessor's high regard for her, and the important role she plays.

The Director of Public Prosecutions, Barra McGrory QC, briefed me on some operational problems inherent in the prosecution of alleged terrorists. The deficiencies in the administration of criminal justice and the limited progress in case management are all too obvious. Applications for disclosure in major terrorism trials and the need for appropriate balance, continue to present problems. Tightening the criminal justice system by streamlining criminal justice processes and faster committal proceedings would increase public confidence.

A topic raised by several politicians was the extent of the activities, as well as the remit, of the National Crime Agency (NCA). The NCA's Head of Investigations informed me NCA officers in Northern Ireland can only exercise constabulary powers or undertake covert investigatory activity with the agreement of the Chief Constable. The PSNI are sighted on all operational

activity. The NCA has no national security function, but is concerned with serious crime, for example child exploitation and drug smuggling, including crime carried out by paramilitary groups. In this regard it has a good working relationship with MI5. I am satisfied these statutory provisions are adhered to.

Progress on "the past" is still at an early stage while expectations for the proper and balanced understanding of the history in relation to the legacy inquests remain high. Funding is a continuing issue.

The Assistant Chief Constable responsible for policing the marching season reported an overall sense of reduced tension compared to the previous year and the 12 July parades passed off without serious incident. I was encouraged by the dismantling in early October of the Twaddell Avenue protest camp, which had been established and ongoing since 2013.

I was impressed by the standards and commitment of senior members of MI5 and the PSNI who provided unstinting time and access. My thanks are also due to the NIO for its support.

I have measured performance in 2016 against the five key principles identified in relation to national security in Annex E to the St Andrews Agreement of October 2006. My conclusions in relation to Annex E can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2017-07-17/HCWS54/>."

[HCWS54]

TRANSPORT

HS2 Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I would like to update the House on the progress of High Speed Two.

Phase One of the railway—from London to West Midlands—is progressing well. In February, Parliament granted powers to construct the route from London to Birmingham, including new stations at London Euston, Old Oak Common, Birmingham Curzon Street and Birmingham Interchange, near Solihull. As a result, enabling works on the route, contracts for which were awarded last November, have now started.

In March last year, the tender shortlist for Phase One of the main civil engineering works contracts, comprising bridges, tunnels, embankments and viaducts, was released. These are the biggest HS2 contracts to date. In a clear signal of how work is progressing, this morning I am pleased to announce the decision to award Stage 1 of these contracts, comprising design and construction preparation works, to the joint ventures set out below. Contracts are expected to be signed after completion of the mandatory standstill period. The joint ventures are as follows:

Area South

S1—Euston Tunnels and Approaches—SCS JV (Skanska Construction UK Limited, Costain Limited, STRABAG AG)

S2—Northolt Tunnels—SCS JV (Skanska Construction UK Limited, Costain Limited, STRABAG AG)

Area Central

C1—Chiltern Tunnels and Colne Valley Viaduct—Align JV (Bouygues Travaux Publics, VolkerFitzpatrick, Sir Robert McAlpine)

C2—North Portal Chiltern Tunnels to Brackley—CEK JV (Carillion Construction Limited, Eiffage Genie Civil SA, Kier Infrastructure and Overseas Limited)

C3—Brackley to South Portal of Long Itchington Wood Green Tunnel—CEK JV (Carillion Construction Limited, Eiffage Genie Civil SA, Kier Infrastructure and Overseas Limited)

Area North

N1—Long Itchington Wood Green Tunnel to Delta Junction and Birmingham Spur—BBV JV (Balfour Beatty Group Ltd, VINCI Construction Grands Projets, VINCI Construction UK Ltd, VINCI Construction Terrassement)

N2—Delta Junction to WCML Tie-In - BBV JV (Balfour Beatty Group Ltd, VINCI Construction Grands Projets, VINCI Construction UK Ltd, VINCI Construction Terrassement)

The expected total value of these contracts including both Stage 1 and Stage 2 (the full construction phase) is currently estimated to be worth around £6.6 billion. Stage 2 will commence in 2019 and, along with Stage 1, is expected to support 16,000 jobs across the country. In addition, they are expected to generate 7,000 contract opportunities in the supply chain, of which around 60% are expected to go to SMEs.

HS2 stations at Euston, Old Oak Common and in Birmingham will be central to HS2 and the work needed to develop designs is also well underway. Last week, both the Invitations to Tender (ITTs) for the station design services contracts for all four Phase 1 stations and the Invitation to Participate in Dialogue (ITPD) for a Euston master development partner were released to shortlisted bidders. These are significant milestones. They show how progress is continuing at pace in order to deliver stations that will be embraced by the local communities, drive economic growth and provide seamless journeys for passengers.

We are also making good progress on the rest of the route. Later today, I will be introducing a Bill to Parliament seeking the necessary powers to construct Phase 2a of HS2, from West Midlands to Crewe. Phase 2a will bring HS2 within reach of all the cities in the North that have existing rail connections to Crewe. I will also be updating the House on other developments along the Phase 2 route including decisions on the 2b route from Crewe to Manchester and West Midlands to Leeds.

The progress we are making with HS2 is clear evidence that the Government are delivering on their commitments and are getting on with building the infrastructure needed to build a stronger, fairer, more prosperous Britain.

[HCWS49]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 17 July 2017

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 17 July. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the July Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include the EU global strategy, Libya and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

EU global strategy

EU Foreign Ministers will discuss the second year priorities for the European global strategy. The UK remains committed to European security and will engage constructively in these discussions, including ensuring complementarity with NATO.

Libya

The appointment of a new UN Special Representative of the Security General (SRSG) makes it a timely moment for a stocktake on Libya. Discussion will focus on the latest developments in the Libya political process. The UK aims to build support for the Libyan political solution based on amending the Libyan political agreement to be more inclusive, and to create momentum around the appointment of the new SRSG Ghassan Salame.

DPRK

Discussions will cover the importance of a united international response to the launch of a inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) by the DPRK on 4 July. We expect this will focus on the need for the EU to use its collective weight to pressure China to exert further their unique influence on DPRK. The UK will use the discussion to make clear the EU has an important role to play on this issue through increased sanctions on the DPRK.

[HCWS52]

Foreign Affairs Council: 19 June 2017

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 19 June. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

Foreign Affairs Council

The meeting covered discussions on the EU global strategy, EU-NATO, counter-terrorism, migration, Iraq and the Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting.

EU global strategy

The Council had a discussion on the implementation on the EU global strategy. Foreign Ministers welcomed the report and highlighted the important work achieved over the year.

EU-NATO co-operation

Foreign Ministers discussed EU-NATO co-operation with NATO Deputy Secretary-General Rose Gottemoeller. The discussion was based on a joint progress report by the EU High Representative and the Secretary General of NATO. The Council adopted conclusions on the report, welcoming progress in the implementation of the common set of proposals and calling for further steps in the same direction. Foreign Ministers agreed to support more work, including on counter-terrorism, cyber security, hybrid threats and strategic communications.

Counter-terrorism

The discussion began with condolences for the recent attacks in London, Manchester and Mali. Foreign Ministers debated the external aspects of counter-terrorism, a timely discussion in view of the recent attacks in the EU and beyond. They underlined that counter-terrorism is the highest security priority for the EU. The Council

adopted conclusions on counter-terrorism. The UK set out four areas to confront: risk of radicalisation in domestic communities; external conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Libya attracting foreign fighters; overseas financing of extremist groups; and online radicalisation.

Migration

Foreign Ministers discussed the external aspects of migration in preparation for the European Council of 22-23 June. They took stock of the progress made on the partnership framework. They discussed pressure on transit and origin countries, and the impact of EU efforts in the Mediterranean.

Iraq

The Council discussed Iraq, focusing on the latest developments, in particular in Mosul and Nineveh province, and on the future stabilisation of the country. The Council adopted conclusions.

Gulf crisis

Foreign Ministers discussed the current crisis in the Gulf region. They urged de-escalation of the crisis through dialogue and negotiation, and welcomed the mediation efforts of Kuwait. Ministers agreed on the importance of being seen to be impartial in the dispute. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs shared the UK's analysis on the situation in the Gulf.

Eastern Partnership ministerial

Ministers discussed anti-corruption, strategic communication, rule of law, and human rights reform in Eastern Partnership countries. They welcomed the progress made on all of these issues and stressed their continued importance.

Ministers agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on climate change following the United States Administration's decision to leave the Paris Agreement.

The Council adopted conclusions on a framework for a joint EU diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities ("cyber diplomacy toolbox").

The Council adopted conclusions on a renewed impetus for the Africa-EU partnership.

The Council adopted conclusions on Mali and the Sahel.

The Council adopted conclusions on the EU strategy for Central Asia.

The Council adopted conclusions welcoming the Court of Auditors' special report on "EU assistance to Tunisia".

The Council adopted conclusions on EU engagement with civil society.

The Council extended the restrictive measures in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol by Russia until 23 June 2018.

The Council extended the restrictive measures on sanctions on Guinea-Bissau for a further 12 months.

Member states participating in the European Defence Agency (EDA) adopted a declaration reaffirming their commitment to strengthen European defence co-operation by improving security of supply.

The Council endorsed a Joint Declaration between the EU, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Spain, the UK and Vietnam on reinforced co-operation in the field of sustainable energy.

[HCWS53]

Written Statements

Tuesday 18 July 2017

CABINET OFFICE

Senior Salaries Review Body Recommendations

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): The 39th report of the Senior Salaries Review Body is being published today. This makes recommendations about the pay of the senior civil service, senior military officers, the judiciary, and executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies.

The Government greatly value the important work that public servants do in delivering essential public services. We understand the need to ensure that we are able to recruit, retain and motivate staff with the right skills and experience. However, there is a trade-off between pay and jobs in many public services, and pay restraint is one of the many difficult choices the Government have had to make to help put the UK's public finances back on track. Senior public sector workers, like everyone else, will have to continue to play their part to ensure we deliver job security for working people across the country. This will help us to strike the right balance between protecting people's jobs, being fair to public sector workers and being fair to those who pay for it.

Senior Military Officers

The Government have accepted the recommendation of a 1% increase to senior military salaries with effect from 1 April 2017. The Government have also accepted the recommendation that there is no change to the current pay differentials for senior medical and dental officers.

Judiciary

The Government accept the review body's recommendation of a 1% salary increase for the Judiciary.

Senior Civil Service

The Government accept the recommendation on developing innovative pay and workforce proposals. The Government support the development of workforce strategies and supporting reward objectives within public sector pay policy. The Government agree that there is a need to target resources to address any specific recruitment and retention issues that arise and that there should be a greater focus on the total reward package. This will ensure the right balance between ongoing pay restraint and the need to attract and retain people of the right calibre.

The Government accept the recommendation on using the 1% award in full. Workforce groups will implement the average 1% award in full unless there is a strong rationale to do otherwise.

In line with the SSRB recommendation, the Government will keep under review the evidence for making pension packages more flexible, alongside the fiscal implications.

The Government accept the recommendation to conduct a review of the Senior Civil Service pay framework. The Government invite the Senior Salaries Review Body to

contribute towards the review of the Senior Civil Service pay framework that the Cabinet Office is currently undertaking. The Cabinet Office would welcome any expertise that the Senior Salaries Review Body can provide on this review over the coming months. The intention is that the outcome of this review will underpin fully considered proposals for a more strategic approach to Senior Civil Service pay in the Government's evidence to the SSRB, with the potential that some recommendations could be implemented from April 2018.

Executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies

The Government accept the recommendation that the 1% available for basic increases this year is used in full for executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies, unless there is a strong and explicit rationale to do otherwise.

The Government accept the Senior Salaries Review Body's recommendation that Arm's Length Bodies use the whole available budget for non-consolidated awards for the top 25% performers and that any individual Arm's Length Bodies who decide not to use their full allocation must make a formal case to the Department of Health Remuneration Committee explaining the rationale for their decision.

The Government accept the SSRB's recommendation to develop a coherent proposition on how best to set the pay of executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's length Bodies in the future and agrees with the recommendation that executive and senior managers are removed from the Senior Salaries Review Body remit while a scoping exercise is undertaken to consider the inclusion of very senior managers in the wider NHS.

The Government accept the Senior Salaries Review Body's recommendation to give active consideration to developing innovative pay and workforce proposals that are focused on maximising outcomes for lowest cost rather than limiting basic pay increases across the board and will consider proposals within public sector pay policy.

The Government accept the recommendation to closely examine the options for making pension packages more flexible where there is a compelling case to do so.

Copies have been laid in the Vote Office, the Printed Paper Office and the Libraries of both Houses. We are grateful to the chairman and members of the Review Body for their work on this year's report.

[HCWS57]

TREASURY

Childcare Services Roll-out

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We know the cost of childcare is an important issue for working families—that is why we have made childcare more affordable, given parents more choice and raised standards of provision, supporting parents into work and helping them with the costs they face.

In total, the Government will provide over £6 billion of funding per annum in childcare support by 2019-20 to working families and those on low incomes. For parents

across the UK, tax-free childcare will cut childcare costs by up to £2,000 per year for each child under 12 years old, or £4,000 per year for disabled children under 17 years old.

We introduced the childcare service on 21 April 2017 by accepting applications from parents of children under four years old (born on or after 1 September 2013). On 14 July the Government extended the service to a cohort of parents with children born on or after 1 April 2013 to ensure that these parents can access the 30 hours offer for their four year old child before the start of the school term in September. This enables even more families to benefit from the Government's childcare offer and helps busy families with children under five who want to claim a 30 hours free childcare place for September.

The Childcare Choices website brings together all the Government's childcare schemes in one place for the first time, and eligible parents can apply for tax-free childcare and 30 hours free childcare through a single and simple application.

They can apply for all their children at the same time once their youngest child qualifies, saving time and avoiding the need to provide the same information twice. All eligible parents will be able to apply for tax-free childcare by the end of 2017.

Parents can apply via the childcare service for both 30 hours' free childcare and tax-free childcare. The application is straightforward and can be accessed via the childcare choices website at: <https://www.childcarechoices.gov.uk/>.

To date, over 150,000 parents have successfully applied to the service and over 45,000 childcare providers have signed up.

[HCWS68]

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 11 July 2017. The UK was represented by Sir Tim Barrow (Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the European Union). European Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the 10 July meeting of the Eurogroup, and Ministers discussed the current economic situation.

Current financial service legislative proposals

The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Mandatory disclosure rules

The Commission gave a presentation on the proposal for a Council directive amending directive regarding the mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation in relation to reportable cross-border arrangements.

Presentation of the work programme of the Estonian presidency

The new Estonian presidency of the Council of the European Union presented their work programme for the next six months period.

Commission mid-term review of the capital markets union action plan

The Council endorsed Council conclusions on the mid-term review of the capital markets union action plan.

Non-performing loans

ECOFIN held an exchange of views on policy responses to the non-performing loans situation and endorsed Council conclusions.

[HCWS66]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I would like to update the House on progress with the identification and combustibility testing of Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding on high-rise buildings. To date, 259 residential buildings over 18 metres have had samples tested by the Building Research Establishment (BRE), tested by proxy (e.g. are known to be of identical cladding) or have taken their cladding down. None of those tested have passed the limited combustibility test. On the advice of the independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, the BRE are now undertaking system testing that will help establish how different types of ACM panels in combination with different types of insulation behave in a fire.

The figure of 259 includes other residential buildings (such as those in the private sector) but today, I would like to update in particular on those owned by local authorities and housing associations.

It is vital to support building owners in ensuring the safety of their residents. This is why the Government, on the advice of the independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, have offered free of charge testing by the BRE for all residential buildings above 18 metres in height. Local authorities and housing associations were asked to identify residential blocks with ACM cladding and then to submit samples of that cladding material for testing.

Local authorities and housing associations initially told us that around 530 towers were thought to have similar cladding to that seen at Grenfell. They have subsequently been physically inspecting the wall materials present on their buildings, and have collected further information which suggests that the actual number of towers that have ACM is much lower. Based on the most recent information we have received, we now think that no more than 240 local authority and housing association towers have ACM cladding and so need to be tested.

Aggregating information provided by local authorities, indicates that 46 towers across 16 local authorities have ACM cladding. Of these, 42 have been directly tested through BRE and the other four are from identical towers. This means all 46 local authority owned towers with ACM cladding have now had their core material tested for combustibility. All samples have failed the limited combustibility test.

Based on the latest information provided by housing associations, up to 194 towers across 50 housing associations have ACM cladding. Of these, 142 have been tested through BRE, through proxy tests or have taken cladding down. We have been told that 12 towers have sent, or will send, their samples to BRE for testing this week. There are 40 towers owned by housing associations who have not confirmed whether ACM cladding is present nor sent ACM samples for testing.

	Total ACM towers	Total tested by BRE, by proxy test or with cladding removed	Sent for testing this week	Local authorities or housing associations still to confirm whether ACM cladding is present
Local authority (16 LAs)	46	46	0	0
Housing association (50 HAs)	194	142	12	40
Total	240	188	12	40

Some of these housing associations say that they are still investigating the cladding on their towers. Five weeks is too long to still be investigating. We expect these investigations to be complete and relevant samples sent for testing immediately. There is no excuse for any housing association not to have completed its investigation of cladding materials.

To ensure we have a complete picture, we strongly encourage all building owners to provide data where it is currently incomplete or needs updating. Together with the Local Government Association and National Housing Federation we are urgently following up to obtain full information.

[HCWS69]

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): On 26 February 2015, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the then Secretary of State for Education exercised their intervention powers as Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council was failing to comply with its best value duty. They made this decision having considered the report of the inspection by Dame Louise Casey CB and advice note from Sir Michael Wilshaw (then Her Majesty's chief inspector of education, children's services and skills). Due to the extent and the gravity of the failings in the council, the then Secretaries of State decided that the intervention should be broad and wide ranging. They directed that commissioners should exercise all executive functions of the authority, as well as some non-executive ones, including licensing, until the council could exercise them in compliance with its best value duty. A team of commissioners was appointed to exercise these functions.

On the basis of robust evidence of sustainable improvements and confidence that the council was able to exercise certain functions in compliance with the best

value duty, functions have been returned to the council on three separate occasions—11 February 2016, 13 December 2016 and 21 March 2017. I am pleased now to be able to report on further progress made.

In her 18 May 2017 progress report, lead commissioner Mary Ney provided robust evidence to support her recommendation for performance management, human resources (HR), community safety, asset management and waste collection to be returned to the council. She proposed that the council would be required to follow any written recommendations made by the commissioners in relation to any Cabinet decision on services related to domestic abuse services and HR appeals. The latter is time limited. In all other areas, the council must have regard to any formal advice provided to them by the relevant commissioner, and if the formal advice is not followed, written reasons must be provided.

Today, my officials have written to the council to say that I am now “minded to” return these service areas to the council but will seek representations before making a final decision. I am placing a copy of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House and on my Department’s website.

[HCWS67]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body Report

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The supplement to the 2017 report of the Armed Forces’ Pay Review Body (AFPRB) making recommendations on the pay of Service Medical and Dental Officers has been published today. I wish to express my thanks to the Chairman and members of the review body for their report.

The AFPRB’s recommendations are accepted in full with implementation effective from 1 April 2017. Copies of the AFPRB supplementary report are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS55]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council took place in Brussels on 22 and 23 May 2017. A separate written statement is being tabled by the Department for Education concerning the Education Council. The Minister for Digital represented the UK at the culture section of Council and Katrina Williams, the UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, represented the UK at the youth and the sport sections of the Council. As is procedure, this statement sets out a record of that meeting.

Youth

There were two items adopted at the Youth Council. The first pertained to draft conclusions on the role of youth work, which the UK supported, and the second which pertained to EU youth strategy, which again the

UK supported. In addition there was a resolution on the structured dialogue with young people, which the UK adopted. Furthermore, the Commission pointed to the publication on 30 May of the proposed European Solidarity Corps regulation (a priority of President Juncker) which is designed to broaden the narrow focus of helping young people find employment through volunteer placements. In the policy debate on building Europe's future, Ministers highlighted the need to deepen involvement of young people through effective dialogue and via long-term commitment to funding Erasmus Plus. Finally, there was information from the incoming Estonian presidency, which stated that it would focus its work programme on "smart youth work" via digital means.

Culture

The Council held a minute's silence to commemorate the victims of the Manchester bombing, with all Ministers expressing their condolences to the UK, and many noting that the attack had taken place at a cultural event.

The main item at the Council was the audiovisual media services directive. The presidency explained why it believed its compromise text to be well balanced and it was made clear that a general approach would be sought at this Council. The UK was firm that the weakening of the country of origin principle remained the main outstanding concern. There was an initial attempt to find a qualified majority with which to support the file, however this failed. As a result, amendments were made to the text on the issues of scope and jurisdiction criteria, and a general approach was agreed, without the support of the UK. This matter will now proceed to trilogue.

In addition, the draft Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations was also adopted, with the agreement of the UK.

Sport

The Council adopted two conclusions, one regarding Council conclusions on sport as a platform for social inclusion through volunteering, and the other regarding the EU work plan for sport. The UK agreed with the adoption of both sets of conclusions. In addition, there was feedback from the World Anti-Doping Agency meeting in Montreal and France presented on their candidacy to host the 2024 Olympic games. There was also a discussion on social inclusion in sport with a presentation from the Premier League. The UK underlined its work to promote inclusion through social media campaigns and major events such as the Paralympics.

[HCWS61]

Telecommunications Council

The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock): The EU Council of Ministers' Telecommunications Council took place in Luxembourg on 9 June 2017. Due to the timing of the general election, the UK's Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK at this Council. As is procedure, this statement sets out a formal record of that meeting.

The first item was a progress report and policy debate on the following two legislative instruments:

Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Electronic Communications Code (Recast); and

Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications.

The Council adopted a general approach on the regulation on cross-border parcel delivery services. There was a qualified majority in favour.

The last main agenda item was the ePrivacy regulation, on which there was a progress report. There was no substantive debate on this item.

These items were followed by information points on: the roaming regulation; internet connectivity in local communities (known as 'WiFi4EU'); the Digital Single Market Strategy; cybersecurity; and the Commission's EU Digital progress report.

Finally, the Estonian delegation informed the Council of its priorities for the Estonian presidency, beginning on 1 July 2017.

[HCWS63]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

International Criminal Justice: Support and Funding

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Monday 17 July marked the Day of International Criminal Justice. This is an opportunity to restate the UK's strong commitment to the principles of international justice and to reflect on our political and financial support to international justice, including through our support for the International Criminal Court (ICC) and international tribunals.

International criminal justice promotes the rule of law and is underpinned by the principle that there should be no impunity for the most serious crimes of international concern such as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Over the past year, we have continued to voice our support for these values and taken action to put them into practice.

In 2016, we demonstrated the UK's commitment to international justice by contributing £8.1 million to the ICC: £1.1 million to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY); £400,000 to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR); and £770,000 to the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (MICT). The UK also contributed £1 million in voluntary funding to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), and smaller amounts to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone (RSCSL). The UK is delivering practical support for the RSCSL with former Liberian president Charles Taylor serving his sentence for war crimes in a British prison. In December, the UK co-sponsored a UN resolution to establish the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIM) to investigate crimes in Syria and has contributed £200,000 towards its start-up costs. In September 2016, at the UN General Assembly, the Foreign Secretary, alongside the Foreign Ministers of Iraq and Belgium, launched a campaign to bring Daesh to justice. This is a critical and global effort to ensure Daesh is held accountable for its crimes.

Our support is designed to enable the fight against impunity and prosecute those responsible for perpetrating genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UK believes that achieving justice for victims should be at the heart of the international community's response to mass atrocity violence. To this end, the UK contributed £150,000 to the ICC's trust fund for victims, which provides physical and psychological rehabilitation, material support and reparations to victims and their families.

At the ICC, by the end of 2016, there were 10 situations under investigation: Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur, Central African Republic I, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Libya, Central African Republic II, Mali and Georgia. In addition, there were 10 preliminary examinations: Afghanistan, Colombia, Nigeria, Guinea, Iraq, Burundi, Ukraine, Gabon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and registered vessels of Comoros, Greece and Cambodia. In 2016, the Court saw its first convictions on the basis of "command responsibility" for the crime of rape, intentionally attacking historic and religious monuments, and for witness and evidence tampering. The Court also made its first substantive award of individual and collective reparations to compensate victims of the DRC war criminal, Germain Katanga.

At the ICTY, the UN's first war crimes tribunal prepares to close its doors at the end of the year. Before closing, the tribunal is expected to deliver key verdicts in the trial of Ratko Mladic, former army commander of the Republika Srpska and in the appeal by six senior Croat military and police officers against their convictions. Like Radovan Karadzic who was sentenced to 40 years' imprisonment in March 2016, Mladic faces charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

When the work of the ICTR ended in 2015, the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals (MICT) took on its remaining functions, ensuring a smooth transition. The MICT will also take on the residual work of the ICTY, including its legacy, at its closure by the end of 2017.

This is the fifth annual update to Parliament on the FCO's work to support international justice.

[HCWS59]

British Council Annual Report

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):
Copies of the British Council's annual report and accounts for the 2016-17 financial year have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report can also be found at the British Council's website at: www.britishcouncil.org.

During the period the British Council received £158.3 million Grant-in-Aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

[HCWS58]

HEALTH

Annual Assessment of NHS England

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):
Today, I am laying before Parliament my annual assessment of the NHS Commissioning Board (known as NHS England) for 2016-17. A copy is available as an online

attachment. This draws on and responds to NHS England's annual report and accounts 2016-17, which were laid earlier today (HC101).

The Government's mandate to NHS England sets out the steps that we expect it to take to help deliver our shared vision for the safest, most compassionate, highest quality health system in the world. We recognise that this can only be achieved through the outstanding contribution that the 1.3 million NHS staff across the country make each and every day in delivering care and support for patients, and I would like to pay tribute to their diligence, professionalism and expertise.

NHS England's annual report sets out the progress made in delivering the mandate. It describes an organisation that continues to ensure that high-quality care is delivered in the face of rising public demand and cost pressures across the system, and emphasises the need to deliver the next steps on the five year forward view to address these challenges. The Government support the NHS's plan, including the development of clinically led and locally supported sustainability and transformation partnerships.

My annual assessment welcomes the good progress that has been made in challenging circumstances, while recognising that there remains a great deal more to do, particularly to improve quality, access and safety while maintaining financial sustainability for the future.

NHS England's core aim is to deliver excellence in access and outcomes for patients and, this year, substantial advances have been made across a number of areas, including mental health, maternity care and diabetes prevention. NHS England has also made a significant contribution to overall financial balance in the NHS.

However, continued growth in demand has put pressure on services and the NHS is not meeting core patient access standards. This remains a key priority and, to help address this, in 2017-18 NHS England will need to better manage demand, including by working with local government to ensure patients are transferred to more appropriate care when they are fit to leave hospital. To support this, the Government have provided an extra £2 billion for local authority-funded adult social care over the next three years, with £1 billion available in 2017-18.

My assessment sets out the Government's expectation that the NHS will make further progress in the year ahead on achieving parity of esteem for mental health. Continuing the constructive joint working with NHS Improvement and Health Education England to better manage the challenges the NHS experiences over winter, as well as continuing progress to retain and increase the workforce, will be key. We will also look to NHS England, working with NHS Improvement, to deliver a balanced NHS budget.

We will continue to work closely with NHS England to address the significant challenges ahead and provide a sustainable and efficient health service with quality, transparency and safety at its heart.

Copies of my annual assessment and NHS England's annual report will be available from the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-18-HCWS64/>

[HCWS64]

Towards a Smokefree Generation—A Tobacco Control Plan for England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine): The Government have today published the Tobacco Control Plan for England, with a vision to create a smoke free generation. A copy is attached.

The 2017-2022 Tobacco Control Plan for England sets the overarching strategic direction for tobacco policy. The last tobacco control plan ran from 2011-2015. All the ambitions set in the previous plan were exceeded, during a period when the Government successfully introduced a significant amount of legislation, including standardised packaging of tobacco products and a ban on smoking in a car when a young person is present.

The new plan does not introduce new legislation. Instead, it shifts emphasis from action at the national level such as legislation to focused, local action, supporting smokers, particularly in disadvantaged groups, to quit.

The plan lays down bold ambitions for reducing smoking prevalence in England, en route towards creating a smoke free generation. These are:

Reduce the prevalence of 15 year olds who regularly smoke from 8% to 3% or less by the end of 2022.

Reduce smoking prevalence among adults in England from 15.5% to 12% or less by the end of 2022

Reduce the inequality gap in smoking prevalence between those in routine and manual occupations and the general population by the end of 2022.

Reduce the prevalence of smoking in pregnancy from 10.5% to 6% or less by the end of 2022.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-18/HCWS56>.

[HCWS56]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Independent Monitor Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The 2015 Annual report from the Independent Monitor is being published today at: www.gov.uk. A copy of the report will also be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS62]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs post-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Estonian presidency took place on 6 and 7 July in Tallinn. I represented the UK for interior day and the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice represented the UK for justice day.

Interior day began with a discussion on migration through the central Mediterranean following the joint French/German/Italian/Commission declaration on 3 July

and subsequent publication of the “Action Plan on measures to support Italy, reduce pressure along the Central Mediterranean route and increase solidarity”. The UK agrees work must continue on strengthening the EU’s external borders and I joined other Ministers in expressing support for Italian efforts and for the measures proposed in the action plan.

Ministers then discussed possible developments in EU returns policy. I stressed the UK’s commitment to working with the EU and member states in this area and expressed support for the proposals, presented by the presidency, to focus efforts on linking asylum and returns processes, improving the processes for unfounded asylum claims, and ensuring quick returns following quick decisions.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed ways of safeguarding the EU’s internal security through co-operation with neighbours. The focus was on how to co-ordinate EU and member state activities in helping Ukraine to fight serious and organised crime, improve integrated border management, and counter hybrid threats in order to mitigate possible negative impacts of the security situation in Ukraine on the EU’s internal security. The UK recognises the concerns arising from Russia’s action in Ukraine and I endorsed proposals to step up action to tackle the threat, noting the conference being held in London on 6 July to galvanise international support for Ukraine’s reform process.

Interior day ended with a discussion on next steps on data sharing and interoperability of EU information systems, following the final report of a high-level expert group on data sharing, June JHA Council conclusions on this issue, and the latest security union update from the Commission. The Government support the aim of increasing interoperability of IT systems and ensuring better use of existing data. Member states agreed that interoperability should ultimately increase protection of data, not lessen it, but that clear rules on purpose, access and use were required.

Justice day began with an item on data retention. Ministers explored the implications of the Court of Justice of the European Union judgment in the TELE2/Watson case from December 2016, and the circumstances in which member states would still be able to require the retention of communications data. The Government have played a leading role in official-level discussions on the effects of the judgment. The Justice Secretary led support from Ministers for the continuation of these discussions as a way of carrying out a comprehensive assessment of different options for data retention. The presidency concluded that work will continue in the Friends of the Presidency group on all possible options.

On sale of goods, the presidency posed three questions: whether the rules on offline sales should be aligned with those for online; whether the digital content rules agreed under the Maltese presidency were a suitable model; and how to deal with “smart goods” with embedded digital content. The Justice Secretary said that alignment of rules is desirable for business, except in cases where there would be increased costs and in areas where it would lead to decreased consumer protection in the UK legal system. The Justice Secretary also noted that fragmentation of rules for “smart goods” is undesirable and an evidence-based approach is necessary given the novelty of the area. The presidency noted the apparent

agreement of EU Ministers to align the rules on off- and online sales, and to do so along the lines of the digital content agreement. The Commission said that, in the interests of speed, it would not issue a new proposal to extend the scope of the measure. Rather, it would accept the changes to that end proposed by the Parliament and Council.

There was a discussion on e-justice over lunch. The Justice Secretary expressed the UK's support for the proposal to entrust the management of e-codex—which allows judicial systems to "talk" to each other online—to EU-LISA, the agency which manages other large-scale JHA IT systems (such as SIS II), so long as EU-LISA would not be over-burdened and unable to focus on its existing workload. Robust cyber-security would also be necessary. EU Ministers spoke broadly in favour of the proposal, but the Commission will not propose a legal instrument yet.

The meeting finished with an exchange of views from member states on the question of whether the instrument on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders should be a regulation or a directive. The UK has opted in to this proposal and is committed to

working with other member states and EU agencies in identifying and recovering criminal assets. The Government are neutral on the question of the choice of instrument, but have no objection in principle to a regulation, as long as that regulation does not adversely impact on domestic processes for issuing such orders. Other member states remain split. The Justice Secretary, supported by other member states, also noted specific concerns about a proposed new type of asset-freezing order.

[HCWS60]

R v. Mouncher and Others

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Richard Horwell QC has submitted to me the report of his investigation into the collapse of the R v 'Mouncher and others' 2011 trial (HC 292). I have today laid the report before the House and copies are available from the Vote Office and at: www.gov.uk.

[HCWS65]

Written Statements

Wednesday 19 July 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Contingent Liability: Microgeneration Certification Scheme

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Claire Perry): The microgeneration certification scheme (MCS) is a scheme that certifies products and installers of renewable technologies to provide assurance to consumers about the quality and standard of their installation.

My Department is going through the process of transferring the assets comprising the MCS to the MCS charitable foundation, as part of establishing the MCS as independent of Government. This will help contribute to a renewable technology market that is sustainable in the long term, and will limit the Government's liabilities in relation to the scheme.

The operation of the MCS brings with it an existing contingent liability which has been previously covered under the annually disclosed overarching BEIS contingent liability for potential liabilities relating to claims from suppliers and third parties.

In relation to this, I wish to inform Parliament of a departmental minute which will be presented to Parliament today, giving notice of the Department retaining this contingent liability for which we would issue indemnity provisions to the MCS charitable foundation and the MCS service company. This contingent liability relates to the risk of potential complaints from affected parties regarding events which occurred during the period prior to the transfer, when BEIS held a position of responsibility for the MCS.

We believe it is appropriate to retain this existing contingent liability, even as we transfer the assets to the MCS charitable foundation. By offering this indemnity and enabling the transfer to proceed, the Department benefits from ceasing to take on further liabilities from the point of transfer onwards. The indemnity would be uncapped and last for a period of six years from the date of transfer.

We believe that the risk of any successful claim is low in relation to this contingent liability.

[HCWS82]

Product Recalls and Safety: Working Group

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I am today placing in the Libraries of both Houses, the report of the Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety.

The report is a culmination of longer term, ongoing work on product safety and recalls. An independent review of the recall system was undertaken by Lynn Faulds Wood in 2015, with her review published in February 2016.

The Working Group on Product Recalls and Safety was established in October 2016 to build on the initial work by industry to implement the review. The Working Group was tasked with providing options to support a tangible improvement in the safety of white goods and the recalls system, working to a clearly defined timetable.

The Working Group is chaired by Neil Gibbins, former Deputy Chief Fire Officer for Devon and Somerset and Chief Executive of the Institution of Fire Engineers. Its membership brings together product safety experts, the fire service and trading standards professionals to ensure that we utilise expertise in the relevant fields to identify necessary improvements to the system of product recalls and safety.

Key recommendations include:

a need for centralised technical and scientific resource capability to support decision making and co-ordination of activity of Local Authorities and the businesses that they regulate;

a detailed code of practice should be developed with input from all relevant stakeholders; this should be informed by behavioural insights research. This should set out expected good practice with regard to product safety corrective actions (including recalls); full consideration should be given to establishing central capacity to co-ordinate product safety corrective actions at a central level; systematic and sustainable ways to capture and share data and intelligence should be established and agreed by relevant parties—this should make use of existing systems used by trading standards and the fire service;

manufacturers and retailers should continue to work together and through standards-setting bodies to develop technological solutions to product marking and identification;

Primary authority provides a key mechanism for ensuring that businesses, local authority and BEIS expertise is shared to ensure the protection of consumers; and

the registration of appliances and other consumer goods with manufacturers by consumers should be encouraged to make corrective actions (including recalls) more effective.

Significant progress has already been made by the Working Group, supported by my officials at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in relation to the development of a code of practice on corrective action and product recalls, and a public consultation will be published shortly. Further work to promote the registration of appliances, understand consumer responses to safety information and recall communications is set out in the report as an important step towards a strengthened product safety framework.

We are also keen to see continued progress on work to promote the registration of appliances and understand consumer responses to safety information and recall communications. My Department has supported the behavioural insights work, which underpins the understanding of consumer behaviour. We have also enhanced the product recalls webpages on gov.uk to make it easier to access information about white goods subject to a recall on grounds of a fire safety risk and made links to the Register My Appliance website.

The Working Group recognised the important role that primary authority partnerships can play in achieving better safety outcomes. My Department continues to champion and push forward the scheme. The legislative changes which we are bringing into effect in October will extend and simplify the scheme so that as many businesses as possible can access its benefits.

Following the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, I asked the Working Group to consider whether there was any further work or recommendations for their report. The Working Group have completed that review and concluded

that the original report remains valid and relevant. I publish that report today, with copies of the documents placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS74]

CABINET OFFICE

Conflict Stability and Security Fund

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): I wish to update the House on how the Government have been supporting our national security interests through conflict prevention, peace building, stabilisation, peacekeeping and conflict resolution using the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF).

Details of the programmes funded by the CSSF and its impact so far are in the first annual report, a copy of which will be placed in the Library of the House. The publication of this first report reflects the Government's commitment to transparency in the delivery of official development assistance. We will be updating gov.uk pages with more information on the CSSF and individual programmes.

The CSSF replaced the Conflict Pool in April 2015, as part of a new, more strategic approach to enhancing the delivery of our national security interests directed by the National Security Council (NSC).

As announced in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), CSSF funding has continued to increase and will be £1.162 billion in 2017-18. The CSSF is now one of the world's largest mechanisms for addressing conflict and instability. Its programmes deliver against more than 40 cross-Government strategies set by the National Security Council (NSC). These help to secure the UK, promote peace and stability overseas and contribute directly to SDSR objectives.

Parliamentary accountability for taxpayers' money spent via the CSSF is provided primarily through the Joint Committee for the National Security Strategy (JCNSS). The JCNSS concluded its first inquiry into the CSSF in February. We have responded to the inquiry report and are taking forward many of their recommendations. Further announcements on governance will be made in due course.

Meeting both our legal and policy gender commitments is central to the delivery of the CSSF. Last year the CSSF spent £214.5 million on programmes which addressed gender equality. For example the CSSF in the Democratic Republic of Congo supported the provision of free legal assistance to 269 victims of international war crimes, of which 179 were women, mostly victims of sexual violence.

In addition to supporting peace building activity, CSSF funding is strengthening the multilateral system, supporting the UN and other international organisations to develop more effective multilateral responses to instability. The CSSF funds our contributions (known as assessed costs) to the UN peacekeeping budget. We are the sixth biggest contributor, spending over £300 million in 2016-17. In addition, we have been using CSSF funds to help reform the UN and UN peacekeeping, co-ordinating

outreach to member states to secure pledges of personnel for peace operations and to assist with the transition from pledges to deployments. In 2016-17 the CSSF provided a further £15 million to fund the doubling of the UK's troop contribution to peacekeeping through two new deployments: 70 UK military personnel to support UNSOS in Somalia, which provides essential logistical support for the African Union Mission (AMISOM) that is combating the terrorist organisation Al Shabaab; and 370 UK military personnel to provide engineering and medical support to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

To address some of the JCNSS recommendations for the CSSF a rapid review is being undertaken of Cross-Whitehall Fund governance and structures.

Conflict Stability and Security Fund resources, FY 17-18

CSSF	2017-18 (millions)
Peacekeeping and Multilateral	391.7
Regional/Country Strategies	606.3
Security and Defence	150
Delivery support, including the Stabilisation Unit and National School of Government	14.5
Total	1162.5

[HCWS76]

EDUCATION

School Curriculum

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): In order to ensure our education system drives social mobility, it is imperative that the vast majority of pupils—whatever their background—have the opportunity to study the suite of academic subjects that make up the EBacc. These subjects—English, maths, science, history or geography, and a language—are the core of a rounded and well balanced education that should be the entitlement of the vast majority of pupils. According to the Russell Group, studying these subjects at A-level opens more doors to more degrees.

A recent study found that pupils in a set of 300 schools that increased their EBacc entry, from 8% to 48%, were more likely to achieve good English and maths GCSEs, more likely to take an A-level, or an equivalent level 3 qualification, and more likely to stay in post-16 education.

Since 2010, we have increased the opportunity for pupils to study this combination of GCSEs, with 40% of pupils now being entered for this combination of subjects at GCSE, up from 22% in 2010. However, there are still too few pupils studying these subjects, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately less likely to be studying these subjects.

Research suggests that lower participation from disadvantaged pupils in these core academic subjects can negatively affect social mobility. Yet overall, disadvantaged pupils remain half as likely to be entered for the EBacc subjects as their non-disadvantaged peers, and the gap in EBacc subject entry persists even among the most academically able disadvantaged pupils.

There is no doubt that studying the EBacc subjects up to the age of 16 is right for the vast majority of pupils. As a Government we are committed to unlocking the potential of all pupils regardless of their background and this is why, as set out in our manifesto, we would like to see 90% of year 10 pupils starting to study GCSEs in the EBacc combination of subjects by 2025.

Through our consultation on implementing the EBacc, we sought to understand the barriers schools face in increasing EBacc entry. Having carefully considered the consultation responses, it is my view that we need an approach that is both pragmatic, stretching, and one that takes into account the challenge involved in meeting this ambition.

While some schools are already responding to this challenge by significantly increasing the number of pupils studying the EBacc suite of GCSEs, some schools have more to do to reach our ambition. It will take time to build the right capacity across the whole school system and ensure that schools have access to high quality staff in EBacc subjects, so that all pupils have the best chance of success in their studies.

Taking this all into account it is our ambition that 75% of year 10 pupils in state-funded mainstream schools will start to study GCSEs in the EBacc combination of subjects by September 2022. This will mark an important milestone in driving towards the Government's ambition that the vast majority of pupils—irrespective of background—have access to this core academic suite of GCSEs, which is central to a broad and balanced curriculum.

The Government response being published today considers and responds to the issues raised in consultation responses, and outlines the steps we will take to support schools to deliver the EBacc subjects to the vast majority of pupils.

Copies of the Government's response document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS73]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal Health

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government's 25-year strategy to eradicate bovine TB (bTB) in England.

The Government's comprehensive bTB strategy includes one of the most rigorous cattle surveillance programmes in the world, strong movement controls, a focus on good biosecurity, and badger control where TB is rife.

We are making good progress. The Government have this week applied for official TB-free status for the low risk area of the England—more than half the country—two years ahead of schedule, which will bring trade benefits for farmers in these areas.

Further measures I am outlining today will help us eradicate the disease from the rest of England more quickly and more effectively.

A consultation begins today on proposals to catch disease in herds as early as possible, by introducing a simpler, more risk-based TB testing regime in the high risk area with six-monthly routine surveillance tests. Lower risk herds where owners can demonstrate good biosecurity will be subject to less frequent testing. We are proposing some adjustments to the compensation system to improve incentives for farmers to reduce disease risks on their farms. Also included is a proposal to allow farmers to retain in-calf TB test positive cattle for up to 60 days, subject to biosecurity controls.

I can also confirm that we are now confident that supplies of BCG vaccine are sufficient to allow us to resume the badger edge vaccination scheme. This will help protect healthy badgers and stop disease spreading to new parts of the country. Private groups intending to run vaccination schemes will be able to apply for grants later this year for projects to run next summer.

We are also publishing responses to a consultation on supplementary badger control, and its licensing guidance, outlining plans to make sure disease control benefits in areas that have completed intensive culling are maintained while the disease is still present in England.

We are determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible to create resilient and successful dairy and beef industries.

Copies of the cattle controls consultation and the badger control summary of consultation responses have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS75]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Opt-in Decision: Civil Justice Co-operation Regulations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

On 9 June 2017, the Government opted in to a proposal to change the updating mechanism of three civil judicial co-operation regulations from the comitology procedure to the post-Lisbon treaty delegated and implementing Act procedure. These are technical adjustments that are part of a wider effort to modernise legislation, which the UK supports.

The relevant regulations are the 2001 regulation on taking evidence in other member states to allow for a court in one member state to request to take evidence to another; the 2004 regulation that created that European enforcement order; and the 2007 regulation on service of documents to allow the service of judicial documents from one member state to another.

The Government submitted the explanatory memorandum on the Commission alignment proposals (COM(2016) 798 and COM(2016) 799) on 13 February 2017. The substance and effect of these three regulations will not change, but become subject to the same updating procedures as apply to other, post-Lisbon regulations (a committee composed of representatives from all EU countries providing a formal opinion, usually in the form of a vote, on the Commission's proposed measures). The underlying treaty base (now article 81 TFEU) and the relevant regulations were subject to the UK's justice and home affairs opt-in.

These technical changes protect the UK's position in relation to three important procedural instruments in the area of civil judicial co-operation and demonstrate the UK's commitment to abiding by its rights and obligations until exit negotiations are concluded.

[HCWS83]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Services

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): FCO Services operates as a trading fund of the FCO. Pursuant to section 4(6) of the Government Trading Funds Act 1973 (as amended by the Government Trading Act 1990), I hereby lay copies of FCO Services' Annual Report and Accounts 2016-2017 before the House.

The report has been endorsed by the FCO Services Board and the FCO Services Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (on which sits the lead National Audit Office auditor and the head of FCO Internal Audit). It has also been examined by the FCO Partnership Board.

On 3 July 2017, the Comptroller and Auditor General formally signed off the report and accounts.

For the reasons above, and upon my own examination, I am satisfied that the annual report and accounts represent a true and fair account of FCO Services' performance.

[HCWS72]

HEALTH

NHS Transformation: Investment

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This Government are backing the NHS's own plan for the future, the Five Year Forward View, and funding it with an additional £8 billion a year in real terms by the end of the Parliament. Delivering that vision relies on health and care organisations working together at a local level, which the NHS is taking forward through sustainability and transformation partnerships. These are clinically led, locally driven—and can deliver real improvements for patients. The independent King's Fund has called STPs "the right approach for improving care and meeting the needs of an ageing population".

In the spring Budget the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an additional £325 million of capital funding to invest in local areas who have come together and developed robust plans.

Today, I announce the provisional allocation of this first tranche of capital funding. From a large number of proposals, 25 schemes have been selected in total from across the 15 STP areas as follows:

- Greater Manchester
- Lancashire and South Cumbria
- Dorset
- Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland
- Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire and Luton

- Derbyshire
- West, North and East Cumbria
- Nottinghamshire
- Suffolk and North East Essex
- Herefordshire and Worcestershire
- South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw
- Mid and South Essex
- Norfolk and Waveney
- Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West
- North East London

Further detail on the schemes that will receive funding is available as an online attachment.

In order to qualify for this first tranche of funding, these areas were all judged to be sufficiently advanced on the basis of the STP assessment data (that NHS England will publish on Friday). This data allows patients, managers and the public to see how their STP area is performing across three themes: hospital performance, patient-focused change, and transformation. Each theme is underpinned by key metrics, such as performance in emergency and elective care, safety and leadership. It is a mechanism by which organisations, patients and the public can hold their STP to account.

The quality and diversity of proposals put forward show that the NHS is working innovatively to identify opportunities for transformation in the delivery of health services across their local footprint. The Government are fully committed to supporting this process and the schemes selected for funding will make a substantial difference to the performance of local health systems.

Final confirmation of this funding will be subject to the successful approval of business cases. Organisations receiving funding will also be required to demonstrate that their proposals form part of a robust capital and estates strategy which maximises all opportunities for generating receipts from surplus land disposals within their STP area. We will also expect them to agree a clear delivery plan for generating these receipts. This process will be supported by a central team of strategic estates advisers

The Government remain committed to considering a further round of local proposals for funding in the autumn Budget, subject to the same rigorous value for money tests. In considering these bids we will look to STPs to demonstrate further progress on generating funding from disposals receipts and other sources of finance.

Attachments can be viewed at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statements/Commons/2017-07-19/HCWS71/>.

[HCWS71]

Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): On Wednesday 12 July, Ministers at the Department of Health were informed by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) about an issue identified during a routine inspection of Bio Products Laboratory (BPL). The MHRA provided confirmation on Monday of this week that, in light of all of the

information currently available, their assessment is that no patients have been harmed and none put at additional risk of harm due to the issue.

BPL is responsible for the supply of a range of plasma products to the NHS and a range of other major health systems around the world. The company, in line with best practice, operates a three stage process to ensure the safety of its products:

1. Selection of healthy donors, with all donations tested and traceable to the donor.
2. Further safety tests of plasma in advance of the manufacturing process.
3. During the manufacturing process, all products are specially treated to inactivate viruses.

The MHRA informed Ministers that their inspection identified a problem with the computer software, which controls the stage one process set out above. Following the identification of the issue by the MHRA, a manual review was undertaken by the company to ensure that no inappropriate donations made it through this stage of the process due to the problems with the computer system. This manual review confirmed that no inappropriate samples had made it through to the next stage of the process, and a range of other risk mitigation steps were also implemented.

The MHRA have continued to provide progress updates to Ministers regularly since notification on 12 July.

On Monday of this week the MHRA confirmed to Ministers their assessment that the problem had been addressed through interim measures to provide the necessary assurance while long-term solutions are being implemented. In the opinion of the MHRA, due to the three stage process outlined above, and in light of all of the information currently available, no patients have been harmed and none put at additional risk of harm due to the issue.

The MHRA is continuing to undertake all necessary regulatory activities in order to ensure patient safety, and will continue to keep Ministers informed of this work.

Although there is no evidence of risk to patients in this case, in the interest of transparency, I wanted to update the House to this situation as quickly as possible with the relevant information. In the unlikely event of any changes, I will update the House accordingly.

[HCWS70]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Fire and Rescue Authorities: England

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In May 2016, this Government set out plans to create an independent inspectorate for fire and rescue authorities in England as part of our fire reform programme.

The response to the recent tragic Grenfell Tower fire showcased the very best of fire and rescue services. As the dreadful event unfolded, we saw the resounding bravery and skill of our firefighters and emergency responders.

An inspectorate will help support the continuous improvement of this critical public service and enable fire and rescue authorities to become even more effective, as it is only by identifying and understanding problems that action can be taken to overcome them.

I can today announce that this inspectorate will form part of a newly expanded Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary (HMIC). In order to preserve fire and rescue's distinct identity, HMIC will re-brand as Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

I have recommended to Her Majesty that, following commencement of fire and rescue inspection provisions in the Policing and Crime Act 2017, she appoint Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary, Sir Thomas Winsor, as chief fire and rescue inspector, and for HMIC's existing inspectors to be appointed fire and rescue inspectors. This will be in addition to their existing police inspection responsibilities.

A dedicated team will be appointed to carry out fire and rescue inspections which will include expertise drawn from the fire and rescue sector.

The new inspectorate will work alongside other institutional changes under way in the fire and rescue sector, namely the establishment of the National Fire Chiefs Council and the planned creation of a body with responsibility for setting professional standards for fire and rescue services.

HMIC has a strong track record in holding policing to the highest standards and identifying where action must be taken to improve behaviour and practice. I expect them to replicate this when inspecting fire and rescue authorities. This new inspectorate will provide a crucial assurance function to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of every authority in England and whether they are fulfilling their statutory obligations.

My officials, together with representatives from the fire and rescue sector, will work with the inspectorate over the coming months to develop a comprehensive inspection framework against which fire and rescue authorities will be inspected. The Secretary of State is required to agree both the inspection framework and programme. The first inspection will take place in early 2018 and every fire and rescue authority in England will be inspected thereafter with a report published on every inspection.

The provisions made by the Policing and Crime Act 2017 require the chief fire and rescue inspector for England to lay before Parliament an annual report on the inspections undertaken. This will include his assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of fire and rescue authorities in England for the period in respect of which the report is prepared. The Home Secretary also has the ability to commission the inspectorate to inspect and report on any particular issue in addition to individual authority inspections.

[HCWS78]

Avon Fire and Rescue Service

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): On 2 February, the previous Minister for Policing and Fire announced an independent inspection, led by Dr Craig Baker, into a number of allegations made against Avon Fire and Rescue Authority. I am pleased to announce to Parliament that the inspection is now complete and the Government have today laid before the House and published the report and recommendations.

The inspection, which was the first of its kind, was established under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 (the “1999 Act”). The inspection considered the authority’s compliance with its “best value duty” under section 3 of the 1999 Act which requires the authority to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The report concluded that, in the lead inspector’s opinion, the authority is failing to comply with its duty under section 3 of the 1999 Act and makes a number of proposals for improvement in the areas of governance, leadership, culture and external scrutiny. The proposals include:

a review of the senior management board to ensure they have the necessary experience and capabilities to plan and deliver the transformational change required;

a de-layering exercise with regards to the senior management board with a focus on culture change and professionalism;

a review of the authority’s integrated risk management plan; and

the introduction of a programme board to drive change and support the senior management team.

The Government welcome this independent, comprehensive report and will work closely with Avon Fire and Rescue Authority, the National Fire Chiefs Council and the Local Government Association (LGA) to fully consider the inspector’s findings.

Public safety is a key Government priority and it is our ambition to build on the good progress fire and rescue services have already made to create a service that is more accountable, effective and professional than ever before. To support this, the Government have already announced:

an independent inspection regime for fire and rescue services in England;

the development of an independent professional standards body that will provide a coherent and comprehensive set of professional standards to drive improvements across the sector; and

a consultation on amendments to the fire and rescue national framework for England to include a requirement to discourage the practice of re-engaging senior officers post-retirement with an increase in take-home pay and pension benefits. The national framework is undergoing a complete revision and the new version will be published in early 2018.

I would like to thank Dr Baker and his team for the detailed report and recommendations and the professional manner in which they approached the inspection.

[HCWS79]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

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Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	1
The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 28 February 2017)	7

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The TRG met on 12, 13, 15 and 16 December 2016. The next TRG meetings took place on 6, 9, 13, 16 and 17 March 2017.

[HCWS80]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): Probation services play a vital role in protecting communities and rehabilitating offenders. In delivering the sentences of the court, supervising offenders and helping them to address problems such as unemployment, homelessness and mental health issues, probation officers keep the public safe and prevent future victims of crime.

In 2014-15 the Government reformed the probation system to strengthen its focus on reducing reoffending and protecting communities, and much progress has been made in implementing these reforms. For the first time around 40,000 offenders a year released from custodial sentences of less than 12 months are entitled to statutory support from probation on release, and new through-the-gate services have been introduced to improve the resettlement of released prisoners in the community. We have established 21 community rehabilitation companies (CRCs) to supervise low and medium-risk offenders, and a national probation service (NPS) dedicated to protecting the public from higher-risk offenders. Staff working in the probation system deserve enormous credit for their commitment and professionalism during this period of significant change.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the current delivery of some aspects of probation services must improve. It is inevitable that such fundamental reforms to a complex public service will take some time to bed down. In addition, since the contracts were negotiated the number of offenders sentenced to community orders has fallen, and there has been an increase in the proportion of offenders assessed as posing a higher risk of harm. The result is fewer offenders are being referred to CRCs, leading to falls in CRC income to significantly below the levels expected at the time of the competition. This has made it extremely challenging for CRCs to deliver the services outlined in their contracts. In turn the NPS has seen a growth in their caseload and increased demands on its staff. That is why we have been reviewing the probation system, and why we are now taking steps to improve services.

We have recently taken urgent action to adjust the payment mechanism within the CRC contracts so it better reflects the fixed nature of most of the costs that providers incur when delivering services to offenders. This additional investment, which will see projected payments to CRCs still being no higher than originally budgeted for at the time of the reforms, will make CRC income less sensitive to changes in demand and therefore more reflective of their actual cost structures. This increased certainty about future income will enable CRCs to focus on delivering critical operational services. We are also exploring with providers further improvements that could be made to the delivery of rehabilitative services, and we will set out at a later stage any further changes we will be making as a result.

In addition we are working with the Department of Health, NHS England and Public Health England to develop a joint protocol setting out how probation, health and treatment services should work together to support those serving community sentences in England. We will seek to implement the protocol in a number of test-bed areas this year, and have agreed with the Welsh Government that we will seek to establish a similar protocol in Wales. We are also providing additional funding to Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation and supporting them to introduce a new framework for the inspection of probation services from April 2018. This will provide stronger scrutiny and increased transparency of the performance of probation by introducing annual inspection of CRCs and NPS areas and the publication of individual ratings for providers.

The Government remain wholeheartedly committed to reducing reoffending and protecting the public. The transforming rehabilitation reforms created a framework for more effective probation services and we intend to ensure they deliver the benefits of reduced reoffending. Over the coming months we will continue to work with providers to improve the delivery of probation services and we will make further statements in due course.

[HCWS81]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Finances

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): When the Assembly dissolved in January, no budget had been set for the Northern Ireland Executive for the 2017-18 financial year. Since the end of March it has fallen to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance to allocate funding to Northern Ireland Departments under powers provided by section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

This situation has led to understandable concern and uncertainty among businesses and those relying on public services alike. Since April I have therefore worked closely with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), in conjunction with the NICS board, to keep under review how to provide ongoing assurance around the budget in the absence of an Executive.

In the first instance this led, on 24 April, to my written statement to the House setting out an indicative budget position and set of departmental allocations.

This sought to enable Permanent Secretaries to plan and prepare to take more detailed decisions on cash allocations.

Disappointingly, we remain without an Executive three months on. While progress has been made in discussions between the parties, resolution has not been reached. The parties have, however, made clear that they remain committed to engaging with each other to agree a basis on which an Executive can be formed. If an agreement is reached, I will move quickly to bring forward the necessary legislation to allow an Executive to meet at the next earliest opportunity.

While it is for the Northern Ireland parties to reach an agreed way forward, the UK Government remain committed to working with them and, as appropriate, the Irish Government to secure the restoration of devolved government as quickly as possible. I will maintain close contact with party leaders and the Irish Government over the coming weeks to seek to consolidate progress and encourage continuing discussions towards a deal.

While agreement remains possible, it is clear that an Executive will not be capable of being formed before the autumn. During that time pressures will continue to build, particularly in health and education services. And so as I set out in my written statement on 11 July, I consider it necessary to provide further clarity to support Northern Ireland Permanent Secretaries in addressing those pressures, maintaining public services and continuing to uphold the commitments arising from the Stormont House and Fresh Start agreements.

With that in mind, I set out below adjusted indicative budget positions and departmental allocations for this year. These include resource and capital funding provided in the spring Budget by the Chancellor, as well as resource and capital funding expected to be available from budget transfers and updated forecasts, subject to final data and the usual HM Treasury approval processes.

The allocations do not include any of the financial support the UK Government would be prepared to make available to Northern Ireland following the agreement between the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. This Government recognise the unique challenges faced by Northern Ireland as a result of its distinct history and geographical position. However a restored Executive will need to agree how it wishes to allocate these funds to projects within the priority areas.

As previously, the allocations in the table showed in the attachment do not reflect input from UK Government Ministers on priorities nor do they constrain the future ability of an incoming Executive to adjust its priorities. And it remains for NI civil servants to allocate cash under s59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is important to acknowledge, however, that as the year progresses the scope for significant changes will become more constrained.

This statement does not replace the ultimate need for a formal budget for Northern Ireland. The exercise of s59 powers cannot be sustained indefinitely. And though the advice I have received from the Head of the NICS is that we have not yet reached that critical point, it is approaching. It should be for a new Executive to make swift decisions on its budget to make use of the spending power available to it.

At the same time we will not forget our ultimate responsibility as a Government to uphold political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland. Accordingly,

I reaffirm that the UK Government remain prepared to take forward legislation at Westminster to give authority for the expenditure of Northern Ireland departments should an Executive not be restored in the autumn. If resolution continues to prove intractable beyond that point, we will take further steps to provide the necessary political decision-making in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-19/HCWS77/>.

[HCWS77]

Written Statements

Thursday 20 July 2017

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Insolvency Service Performance Targets

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I have set performance targets for the Insolvency Service for the financial year 2017-18.

The Insolvency Service is the Government agency that provides public services to those affected by financial distress or failure.

The Insolvency Service provides the frameworks that deal with insolvency and the financial misconduct that sometimes accompanies or leads to it. Its aim is to deliver economic confidence through a corporate and personal insolvency regime which is regarded as fair and that gives investors, lenders and creditors confidence to take the commercial risks necessary to support economic growth.

In 2017-18, an important priority for the Insolvency Service will be to maintain its current high level of customer service while initiating a major change programme. I have set measures and targets at a level which reflects the challenges that the agency continues to face.

Attachments are available online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-20/HCWS84/>

[HCWS84]

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Implementation Taskforces

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): Today the Government are publishing an updated list of Cabinet Committees and implementation taskforces.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Library of the House and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS100]

DEFENCE

Type 26 Frigates

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): Following the announcement earlier this month that the Ministry of Defence had signed a £3.7 billion contract for the first batch of the new Type 26 anti-submarine warfare frigates, I am pleased to announce that the frigates will be known as the City Class. The first ship is to be named HMS Glasgow and her construction formally began today. Naming the ships after cities provides significant and readily identifiable linkages with large populations across the United Kingdom. Glasgow is a name with a distinguished historical pedigree, and this

first name in the class provides a tangible connection with the city where the ships will be constructed. There have been eight Royal Navy ships of the name from the early 1700s, who between them have earned 10 battle honours. In more recent history, two ships served in the world wars, including the Arctic convoys and the Normandy landings, and the last ship to bear the name was awarded the “Falkland Islands 1982” battle honour to add to the “Falkland Islands 1914” honour won by her predecessor. The Type 26 frigates, the first of which we expect to enter service with the Royal Navy in the mid-2020s, will provide essential protection to our nuclear deterrent and aircraft carriers into the 2060s, keeping British interests safe across the world.

[HCWS89]

EDUCATION

Post-16 Education

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today the Government are publishing Professor Sir Adrian Smith’s authoritative and wide-ranging review of 16 to 18 mathematics education in England.

The Government are determined to give all young people the world-class education they need to fulfil their potential. This includes providing opportunities to develop the mathematical and quantitative knowledge and skills appropriate to their chosen careers. In an increasingly technological world this will be vital to ensuring that our future workforce will be productive and competitive in the global marketplace.

Sir Adrian Smith’s review identifies a strong economic and social mobility case for raising participation in post-16 mathematics and improving knowledge and skills at all levels. He presents clear evidence for the value of mathematical and quantitative skills to students, whichever route they take.

The report includes recommendations and challenges that are wide-ranging—for example, the need to address negative cultural perceptions of mathematics. These issues will require detailed engagement and action between Government, industry, universities, schools and colleges.

I have today written to Sir Adrian thanking him for the review and confirming that the Government will set out our plans across the range of Sir Adrian’s recommendations in due course. The letter confirms that work is already under way to address a number of the challenges highlighted in the report, and there are a number of recommendations where we have been able to take immediate action.

We agree with Sir Adrian that we must be ambitious and take greater action to encourage and support more young people to choose mathematics post-16, particularly in areas where take-up is low. That is why one of the immediate actions we are taking today is to announce a new £16 million level 3 maths support programme. It will build on the momentum created by the further mathematics and core maths support programmes, and will work with schools and colleges to improve mathematics education by sharing best practice, and delivering knowledge-rich curriculum materials, as well as working

to increase participation and attainment in 16 to 18 mathematics. The programme will work to deliver focused intervention targeted to those who need it most.

The other immediate actions we have taken in response to Sir Adrian's recommendations are set out in my letter. For example, taking forward work on the new T-level qualifications to ensure they include mathematics where employers identify this as a requirement for employment; working with the newly constituted Royal Society Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education to ensure appropriate expert advice. We are also working with institutions such as the Royal Society and British Academy to encourage universities and employers to signal the value of level 3 mathematics qualifications for entry to undergraduate courses with a significant quantitative element and for a wide range of job roles.

We have placed a copy of Sir Adrian's report and our letter in the Libraries of both Houses and on the Government's website.

[HCWS99]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Inter-Pillar Transfer Rate in England

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today I am announcing that the amount transferred from farmers' pillar 1 direct payments to pillar 2 rural development in England will remain at 12% for 2019 and 2020.

Leaving the EU presents an unprecedented opportunity to develop a new system that works for us. The Government have committed to maintain the same total in cash funds until the end of this Parliament. As we prepare to leave, we will work with farmers, food producers and environmental experts across the United Kingdom and with the devolved Administrations to devise a new agri-environment system, to be introduced in the following Parliament.

I have, therefore, concluded that the inter-pillar transfer should remain unchanged in England under the current common agricultural policy framework.

[HCWS87]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

New Bulgarian EU Commissioner

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Steve Baker): My right hon. Friend, Baroness Anelay of St Johns DBE, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

On 7 July 2017, the Council of the European Union supported the appointment of Ms Mariya Gabriel as the new Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society. The UK voted in favour of the appointment of Ms Gabriel as Commissioner. Ms Gabriel is scheduled to hold the post until 31 October 2019.

The Bulgarian Government nominated Ms Gabriel as Commissioner following the resignation of the previous Commissioner for Bulgaria, Ms Kristalina Georgieva, in December 2016. Before her appointment, Ms Gabriel had been a member of the European Parliament since 2009.

[HCWS104]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I have today laid before Parliament a copy of the 2016 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report on human rights and democracy (Cm 9487).

The report highlights policy developments on human rights issues overseas in 2016.

The report assesses the human rights situation in 30 countries which FCO has designated as its human rights priority countries. These are: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

This report focuses on how the Government are striving to protect and promote human rights around the world. In the two centuries since Britain became the first country to outlaw the slave trade, this country has helped to lead the struggle for justice and decency. The Government's approach towards human rights stands in this long tradition, based on the firm belief that our values are not only right in themselves but the key to prosperity and development.

[HCWS90]

EU-Canada Strategic Partnership Agreement

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government wish to inform the House of their decision to opt in to the Council decision on conclusion of the EU-Canada strategic partnership agreement (SPA), in respect of article 18(2) of the agreement, which relates to judicial co-operation in the field of civil and commercial matters. This article falls within title V of part III of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union.

The SPA, a framework political agreement, will update the previous EU-Canada 1976 framework agreement for commercial and economic co-operation between the European Communities and Canada. It has two aims: i) to enhance EU-Canada political ties and co-operation on foreign and security policy issues; and ii) to upgrade co-operation on a wide range of other areas. The SPA, though not technically linked to the EU-Canada comprehensive economic trade agreement (CETA), is complementary and will provide wider benefits to the EU-Canada relationship.

The SPA has been under negotiation, between the EU, its member states and Canada, since 2011. The draft Council decision on conclusion issued on 24 November 2016. Notwithstanding the result of the referendum on EU membership the Government consider that it is in the UK's interests to opt in to article 18(2) of this agreement at the conclusion stage of the SPA negotiations. Article 18(2) of the agreement provides for judicial co-operation in civil and commercial matters. While it is not specific

about the type of co-operation that might be envisaged, the Government believe that it is beneficial for the UK to be involved in any such work between the EU and one of our closest Commonwealth partners while we remain a member of the European Union.

We do not expect the Council decision on conclusion to be adopted until all member states have ratified the SPA.

[HCWS93]

Somalia (Security Assistance)

The Minister for Africa (Rory Stewart): The UK remains committed to building a stable, peaceful and prosperous future for Somalia. Instability in Somalia affects stability across east Africa—fuelling irregular migration and providing a foothold for terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab and Daesh. It is important that we maintain our support in order to tackle these shared threats to both the UK and the Somali people. This is why the British Government have announced a further £21 million of support for security work in Somalia, and helped to agree the security pact at the London Somalia conference earlier this year.

In the shorter term, with the support of the Somali Government, the UK has funded the construction of a police training facility in Mogadishu at a cost of £1,767,016 which will shortly be handed over to the Somali police force. This facility has been funded by FCO policy programme funding. The development of security partners and counter-terrorism (CT) policing in Somalia is vital to help ensure that the Somali authorities have the right tools to deploy in their ongoing fight against terrorism.

The provision of this facility is fully in line with the Government's strategic CT objectives for east and south Africa. Using the overseas security and justice assistance guidance, FCO officials have also assessed the project for human rights risks, and concluded that the risk of such violations arising from the project's delivery may be mitigated.

[HCWS91]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Second Generation Schengen Information System

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government have decided not to opt out of a new EU proposal for a regulation governing the use of the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II) for police and judicial co-operation purposes (“the draft police co-operation regulation”), and not to opt in to a proposal for a regulation on the use of SIS II for the return of illegally staying non-European economic area (EEA) nationals (“the draft returns regulation”).

SIS II is an EU-wide system that circulates alerts on people and objects that are of interest to law enforcement agencies across the EU. This includes people who are wanted for extradition on European arrest warrants,

stolen vehicles, lost or cancelled travel documents and suspected criminals and terrorists on whom information is sought.

The proposed police co-operation regulation will replace the legislation that currently governs SIS II's use for that purpose. The UK has participated in this aspect of SIS II since April 2015. Our law enforcement agencies benefit from this, for example by being able to detain at the border people who are wanted under European arrest warrants and to obtain intelligence from police forces across the EU on suspected criminals and security risks. The draft regulation contains a number of proposals that would update SIS II's capabilities, for example allowing it to store a wider range of biometric data and permitting alerts to be created to protect children who are at risk of going missing. There are some changes we will seek, in particular to maintain member states' control over when alerts are created, but the Government believe we will be in a better position to do this by not opting out and remaining full participants in the negotiation.

The proposed returns regulation would allow member states to use SIS II to circulate alerts on non-EEA nationals who have been made subject to removal decisions. Therefore, the UK will not opt in to the draft returns regulation.

The decisions announced here have no implications for our general opt out from the internal border-free zone established by Schengen.

Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's right to opt in to, or opt out of, forthcoming EU legislation in the area of justice and home affairs on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising our country's security, protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability to control immigration.

[HCWS96]

Newly Naturalised Passport Applicants

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): I am writing to advise you that Her Majesty's Passport Office is introducing changes to its interviewing processes.

HM Passport Office reserves the right to call any passport applicant for an identity interview. However, where the identity of a newly naturalised British citizen can be confirmed using records already held by UK Visas and Immigration, they will not be routinely required to attend an interview as part of their first UK passport application.

The new process maintains our high standards of identity assurance but removes an unnecessary burden on newly naturalised citizens by no longer requiring them to confirm their identity twice to the Home Office before being issued with a UK passport.

[HCWS97]

Mutual Recognition of Freezing and Confiscation Orders

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government have decided that the UK will opt in to the regulation on the mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders.

The proposed regulation would replace and build upon the existing mutual recognition framework which is currently in two existing instruments—the Council framework decision on the execution in the European Union of orders of freezing property of evidence (2003/577/JHA) and the Council framework decision (2006/783/JHA) on the application of the principle of mutual recognition to confiscation orders. These framework decisions were transposed into UK law in 2014.

Through our serious organised crime strategy and action plan for anti-money laundering and counter terrorist finance, we have made it clear that being able to recover criminal monies is a priority. The proposed regulation will bring benefits to the UK through strengthening the ability of our operational agencies to have our orders recognised and executed, particularly in countries which have traditionally been slower to assist in cross-border asset recovery cases.

The UK's experience of the existing framework decisions has been positive, although numbers of mutual recognition requests are limited due to the short time (since 2014) that the decisions have been fully transposed in UK law. Asset recovery in some EU states has traditionally been difficult through mutual legal assistance routes, which are lengthy and cumbersome.

Opting into this measure is also consistent with the UK's approach to participating in EU mutual recognition measures to improve practical co-operation between member states. Opting in at this point shows our continued positive engagement with this measure, and demonstrates our commitment to work together with our European partners to fight crime and prevent terrorism now and after we leave the European Union.

[HCWS101]

Annual JHA Opt-in Reports

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Home Office and Ministry of Justice have prepared the sixth and seventh annual reports to Parliament on the application of protocols 19 and 21 to the treaty on European Union (TEU) and the treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (“the treaties”) in relation to EU justice and home affairs (JHA) matters (Cm 9488). The reports, which are today being laid before the House, are submitted on behalf of both my own Department and that of the Secretary of State for Justice. Copies of the Command Paper are available from the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

On 9 June 2008, the then Leader of the House of Lords committed to table a report in Parliament each year setting out the decisions taken by the Government in accordance with protocol 21 (“the justice and home affairs opt-in protocol”) and to make that report available for debate. These commitments were designed to ensure that the views of the scrutiny committees should inform the Government's decision-making process.

The sixth report covers decisions taken over the period 1 December 2014 to 30 November 2015. In that period, decisions on UK participation in 23 EU JHA legislative proposals have been taken. The UK has decided to opt in under the JHA opt-in protocol in 11 cases and has decided not to opt in in 13 cases (this includes one decision on an international agreement where the UK

opted into one set of JHA provisions in the measure, and did not opt into another). The Government have not asserted the Schengen opt-out to any proposals during that period.

The seventh report covers decisions taken over the period 1 December 2015 to 30 November 2016. In that period, decisions on UK participation in 36 EU JHA legislative proposals have been taken. The UK has decided to opt in under the JHA opt-in protocol in 12 cases and has decided not to opt in in 24 cases. The Government have not asserted the Schengen opt-out to any proposals during that period.

These opt-in decisions are without prejudice to discussions on the UK's future relationship with the EU. The UK's relationship with the EU will change as a result of leaving the EU. However, the UK retains the rights and obligations of membership of the EU while we remain a member.

[HCWS94]

Publications: Former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In November 2013, the then Home Secretary asked David Anderson QC to conduct a review of the framework of the UK's deportation with assurances (DWA) policy, and to make recommendations on how the policy might be strengthened or improved, with particular emphasis on its legal aspects. I am pleased to be publishing his report today (Cm 9462). I can confirm that no redactions have been made to the report.

In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, David Anderson QC, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2015 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which was laid before the House on 1 December 2016. I have carefully considered its recommendations and observations. I am today laying before the House the Government's response (Cm 9489).

I am very grateful to David Anderson for his work on both reports

Copies of David Anderson's report into DWA, and the Government's response to his section 36(5) report will be available in the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

[HCWS105]

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Brandon Lewis): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules (HC 290).

The purpose of the changes is to give effect to the Supreme Court judgment in *MM (Lebanon) & Others*, handed down on 22 February 2017.

The changes, together with changes to the Secretary of State's guidance to decision makers, are intended to give effect to the judgment's findings in respect of, first, the income sources which may be relied upon to meet the minimum income requirement in specified exceptional

circumstances; and, secondly, the duty to have regard to the welfare of children under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. They also make other minor amendments and clarifications to the family immigration rules.

[HCWS95]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

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The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 31 May 2017)	6

The TPIM review group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The most recent TRG meetings took place on 26 and 30 June, and 3 and 4 July.

The case of Secretary of State for the Home Department v. EC and EG [2017] EWHC 795 (Admin) was heard again at the High Court between 24 January and 2 February 2017. In a judgment handed down on 11 April 2017 Mr Justice Collins upheld the Secretary of State's decision to impose a TPIM notice on EC and EG. This judgment can be found at: www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2017/795.html.

[HCWS98]

Science Advisory Non-Departmental Public Bodies: Triennial Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): On 21 July 2014, my predecessor as Home Secretary my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), announced in Parliament, through a written ministerial statement, the commencement of the triennial review of the Home Office science advisory non-departmental public bodies: the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD); the Animals in Science Committee (ASC); and the National DNA Database Ethics Group (NDNADEG). I am now pleased to announce the completion of the review.

The ACMD, ASC and NDNADEG are independent bodies that advise ministers on scientific issues.

The review concludes that the functions performed by the ACMD, the ASC and the NDNADEG are still required and that they should be retained as non-departmental public bodies. The review concludes that the control and governance arrangements are robust

and compliant with the principles set out in the principles of good corporate governance for advisory NDPBs, the code of practice for scientific advisory NDPBs and the principles of scientific advice to Government.

The review recommends that the remit of the NDNADEG should be extended to cover the ethical issues associated with all forensic identification techniques including facial recognition technology and fingerprinting, and the collection and retention of biometric data. This recommendation has been accepted and therefore the name of the NDNADEG will change to the Biometrics And Forensics Ethics Group. The review also makes two recommendations in relation to accountability of Ministers for the bodies: that the chair of the NDNADEG should meet a Home Office Minister in the next 12 months; and an annual report should be published for the ASC and ACMD. Both recommendations have been accepted.

The full report of the triennial review of the ACMD, the ASC and the NDNADEG can be found on the gov.uk website and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS92]

JUSTICE

Lugano and Hague Conventions

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lidington): The United Kingdom has opted in to the following Council decisions:

(i) Council decision of 7 February 2013, authorising the opening of negotiations on agreements between the EU and Denmark, Norway, Iceland and Switzerland in the areas of cross-border service of judicial and non-judicial documents and the taking of evidence in civil and commercial proceedings. (Norway, Iceland and Switzerland are commonly referred to as the Lugano States).

The negotiating mandates set out the position of the EU in discussions on the prospects for agreements between those states in the areas of cross-border service of judicial and non-judicial documents and taking of evidence in civil and commercial proceedings.

There have been three rounds of discussions so far, and final agreements have yet to be reached. The decision of the then Government in 2013 to opt in to the negotiating mandates does not commit this Government to opt in to future EU agreements in these spheres. I will update the House as further information becomes available.

(ii) Council decision authorising the opening of negotiations on a convention on the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters (the Judgments Convention) in the framework of the Hague Conference on Private International Law.

The negotiating mandate of May 2016 sets out the position of the EU in discussions at a Hague conference level on the prospects for an international convention which would set out rules for the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters, delivered by foreign courts.

Detailed discussions on the form of a convention text began in June 2016 and will continue among EU member states and at Hague conference level for some time to come. The next Hague conference special commission to discuss the project will take place in November 2017.

Opting in to the EU negotiating mandate does not commit the UK Government to acceding to any future convention.

Due to an oversight, a written ministerial statement on these Council decisions has not thus far been placed before both Houses, for which I apologise.

[HCWS102]

PRIME MINISTER

Home Buying Policy, Commonhold Law and Protected Persons

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms three machinery of Government changes.

Responsibility for home-buying policy, including estate agent regulation, will transfer from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Department for Communities and Local Government. Responsibility for commonhold law will transfer from the Ministry of Justice to the Department for Communities and Local Government. These changes will be effective immediately.

Responsibility for protected persons policy will transfer from the Ministry of Justice to the Home Office. This change will be effective immediately.

[HCWS88]

SCOTLAND

Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): In March 2016, the Government announced their intention to negotiate a city region deal for Edinburgh and south-east Scotland. As well as deals across England and Wales, this follows the successful agreement of city region deals for Glasgow and Clyde Valley, Inverness and the Highlands and Aberdeen city region.

I can today inform the House that the Government have reached agreement with the Scottish Government and regional partners on a heads of terms for a city region deal for Edinburgh and south-east Scotland.

This deal will bring in excess of £1 billion of investment into the Scottish capital city region. Local partners' aspirations are that this investment will create in excess of 21,000 good quality jobs.

Central to the investment is the UK Government contribution of up to £300 million, which is being matched by Scottish Government. This investment is expected to unlock a considerable further investment from the city region's universities, higher education sector and the private sector.

UK Government investment will support local partners in delivering their ambition to make Edinburgh a leader in data-driven innovation. Building on existing regional excellence in R and D and innovation, the investment will see significant investments in digital infrastructure and data storage as well as the development of five

R and D hubs across the city-region. These hubs will focus on growth in key sectors of the local economy such as data science, robotics, financial services, creative tech and agri-tech.

We will also deliver our manifesto commitment to support a new concert hall in Edinburgh, meeting the need for a mid-sized venue in the city.

Projects and programmes announced in the heads of terms document will be subject to the development and approval of business cases. Moving forward, the Government will work with the Scottish Government and the civic, academic and business leaders of Edinburgh and south-east Scotland to ensure the successful implementation of the deal.

This represents an important step in delivering the UK Government's commitment to a city deal for each of Scotland's cities, as we work to strengthen the Union and build a United Kingdom that works for everyone.

[HCWS103]

TRANSPORT

High Level Output Specification

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I am today publishing my high-level output specification (HLOS) and initial statement of funds available (SOFA) for the railway for control period 6, which covers the years 2019 to 2024.

The Government are determined that the railway becomes more focused on issues that matter most to passengers—such as punctuality and reliability. A more reliable railway also plays a critical role in underpinning economic growth and bringing the country together. The Government are committed to taking action to achieve these outcomes.

The HLOS is therefore focused on the operation, maintenance and renewal of the existing railway—the areas of activity that will deliver a more reliable railway for passengers. The Government are already delivering significant enhancements to the railway, including High Speed 2 and Crossrail and expect to continue to invest in the enhancement to the wider rail network in the next control period. In the light of the findings of the Bowe review, which emphasised the need to enable better planning, cost control and alignment with the needs of users of the railway, Government will take forward the funding of these enhancements separately. The Government are developing a new process for delivering enhancements and intend to publish more information on this in the autumn.

On the basis of independent advice from the Office of Rail and Road, as well as from the rail industry, the Government have agreed that an increased volume of renewals activity will be needed over the course of control period 6, to maintain safety and improve on current levels of reliability and punctuality, which in places fall short of the levels that passengers rightly expect. This enhanced programme of renewals will be supported by appropriate volumes of operations and maintenance activity required to maintain safety and improve the reliability and punctuality of train services.

Before committing to the specific levels of funding required, I have decided that the Government require more assurance on the likely costs of the work programme. Network Rail's progress on improving its efficiency in recent years has fallen short of my expectations. Improving efficiency is vital if we are to maximise the value of taxpayer spending on the railway in driving improvements for passengers and freight shippers.

The Government will therefore carry out further work to examine the approach to setting appropriate levels of maintenance and renewals activity for control period 6 and to improving Network Rail's efficiency. This will enable me to confirm the extent of Government's funding envelope through the publication of a statement of funds available by 13 October 2017. This work will draw on a number of sources, including the new independent review of progress on efficiency planning which the regulator has commissioned.

Alongside the publication of the HLOS, I am issuing new statutory guidance to the independent Office of Rail and Road. This sets out my priorities for rail regulation. These include supporting the ORR's work to improve Network Rail's efficiency and improving the experience of users of the railway.

I am placing copies of the HLOS and SOFA, and of the statutory guidance to the Office of Rail and Road in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-20/HCWS86/>

[HCWS86]

Rail Update

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):
I wish to inform the House about some important developments regarding the rail networks of the midland main line, south Wales and the north of England.

Passenger numbers on the UK rail network have more than doubled since privatisation 20 years ago and our country's railways need to adapt and change to be able to meet current and future demand. Therefore we are delivering the largest upgrade of the rail network since Victorian times, including modernising rail services and infrastructure on the Great Western main line, midland main line and in the north.

Technology is advancing quickly, and this Government are committed to using the best available technologies to improve each part of the network. New bi-mode train technology offers seamless transfer from diesel power to electric that is undetectable to passengers. The industry is also developing alternative fuel trains, using battery and hydrogen power. This means that we no longer need to electrify every line to achieve the same significant improvements to journeys, and we will only electrify lines where it delivers a genuine benefit to passengers.

These new technologies mean that we can improve journeys for passengers on the Great Western main line in south Wales, the midland main line, and on the lakes line between Windermere and Oxenholme sooner than expected with state-of-the-art trains, instead of carrying out disruptive electrification works along the whole of these routes.

Midlands

The competition to find the next operator for the midland main line is under way. Our goals for the next east midlands franchise are to improve journeys for passengers, drive even stronger economic growth and support investment across the whole region. We want to hear from passengers and local communities about the next rail franchise to ensure it delivers the services that passengers want. I am therefore pleased to inform the House that my Department is today launching a public consultation on the next franchise. The consultation, which will run for 12 weeks from today, will help to inform and develop the franchise specification for inclusion in the invitation to tender. The consultation is available online and will also include a number of local stakeholder events.

The next east midlands franchise will help drive the midlands engine and improve passenger journeys by maximising the passenger benefits of the significant upgrade of the midland main line, the biggest investment in the route since it was completed in 1870. The upgrade will enable reduced journey times and more seats for long-distance passengers during the peaks, as well as more capacity for commuters with dedicated services with longer trains. Journeys will improve from 2020 and, once the full benefits are realised, there will be almost twice as many seats into London St Pancras in the peak compared to today.

The next operator will be required to deliver modern, fast and efficient trains. This includes a brand new fleet of bi-mode intercity trains from 2022, delivering more seats and comfort for long-distance passengers. The provision of these trains will replace plans to electrify the line north of Kettering to Sheffield and Nottingham, improving journeys sooner, without the need for wires and masts on the whole route, and causing less disruption to services. We do not intend to proceed with plans to electrify the line from Kettering to Sheffield and Nottingham, and there will be further investment to come to ensure Sheffield is HS2-ready.

Wales

From autumn 2017, passengers in Wales will benefit from new intercity express trains which will each deliver over 130 more seats, faster journey times and improved connectivity for south Wales to London with 40% more seats in the morning peak once the full fleet is in service.

These innovative new trains switch seamlessly between electric and diesel power, delivering faster journeys and more seats for passengers without disruptive work to put up wires and masts along routes where they are no longer required.

Rapid delivery of passenger benefits, minimising disruption and engineering work should always be our priority and as technology changes we must reconsider our approach to modernising the railways. We will only electrify lines where it provides a genuine benefit to passengers which cannot be achieved through other technologies.

As a result, we no longer need to electrify the Great Western route west of Cardiff. In addition to the new trains, Network Rail will develop further options to improve journeys for passengers in Wales. These will include, but not be limited to:

Improving journeys times and connections between Swansea and Cardiff, and south Wales, Bristol and London

Improving journeys times and connections across north Wales

Direct services from Pembroke Dock to London via Carmarthen on new, state of the art intercity express trains

Station improvements at Cardiff station

Station improvements in and around Swansea including looking at the case for additional provision

I also support a proposal for Wales' first privately funded railway station at St Mellons. My Department will work with the promoters of the scheme as they develop their plans to the next stage.

The first new intercity express trains will enter service from this October and once the whole fleet is introduced and electrification to Cardiff is complete journey times between Swansea, London and other stations along the route will be approximately 15 minutes shorter.

The north

We are investing in the northern powerhouse, upgrading rail services across one of the country's largest networks to improve connections between towns and cities. Passengers in the Lake District will benefit from double the number of direct services to Manchester airport from May 2018. From 2019, there will be brand new trains with more seats and better on-board facilities including air conditioning, toilets, free wi-fi and plug sockets, subject to business case.

We have listened to concerns about electrification gantries spoiling protected landscapes. Northern, the train operator, will therefore begin work to explore the possibility of deploying alternative-fuel trains on the route by 2021, improving comfort and on-board facilities for passengers while protecting the sensitive

environment of this world heritage site. This trial will pilot an alternative-fuelled train, removing the need to construct intrusive wires and masts in this national park. Journeys between Windermere and Manchester airport will be improved sooner and with less disruption to services and local communities. This replaces plans to electrify the line between Windermere and Oxenholme.

This investment is a part of the great north rail project, which will deliver more frequent trains and new direct services on the west coast main line, with faster journeys and increased frequency into and through Manchester from across the north-west. It will boost access to jobs and new opportunities, growing the northern powerhouse by improving connections between the Lake District and the Manchester airport international gateway.

Train operators and Network Rail will need to work as one to deliver these upgrades and introduce the new fleets in a way which ensures passengers experience better journeys as soon as possible.

Rail franchise schedule

The Government have also today published the updated rail franchise schedule, which includes changes to the timescales for the east midlands, cross country and west midlands rail franchises. A copy of the schedule will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-20/HCWS85/>.

[HCWS85]

Petition

Tuesday 11 July 2017

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Children with Special Educational Needs

The petition of Alan and Karen Entwistle,

Declares that the petitioners are the parents of a son who is visually impaired and has learning difficulties because of prematurity and has been diagnosed as autistic by Great Ormond Street hospital; further declares that the petitioners have had difficulties getting the local education authority (Lancashire) to work with them and recognise that they as parents have a uniquely good understanding of the needs of their son; declares that the continual legal disputes with the local authority have now cost the family over 80,000 and depleted all

their savings; further declares that the local authority decided to prosecute the family (on the anniversary of their eldest son's death) for not sending their son to a school that they believed would be harmful to him; further declares that they were unable to fund legal advice to defend themselves, but did manage to get pro bono support as a consequence of this were found that they had no case to answer.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons Education Select Committee investigate the use of legislation relating to absence from school by local authorities to punish parents who disagree with the local authority as to what is best for their children and to propose changes in legislation so that local authorities are required to work with parents rather than simply use the criminal law to impose their will on families.

And the petitioner remains, etc.—[Presented by Julie Cooper.]

[P002044]

Petition

Thursday 13 July 2017

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH

Closure of King George Hospital Accident and Emergency Department

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the petitioners are against the closure of the A&E department at King George Hospital in Ilford.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a review

of the original decision to close King George Hospital A&E and in particular the criteria used which the petitioners believe are now out of date.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Wes Streeting, Official Report, 26 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 1186.]

[P002041]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne):

There is an ongoing process by the local STP Board to revalidate and assure that the original decision to close the King George Hospital A&E remains appropriate.

NHS England has confirmed that the criteria used in the decision are still relevant. They are the standard criteria used in these cases and have been applied by North East London STP as part of their delivery plan.

Petition

Monday 17 July 2017

OBSERVATIONS

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Persecution of Christians

The petition of parishioners of the Parish of Saint John Southworth, Nelson, Brierfield and Fence, Lancashire,

Declares that the petitioners believe that attacks on Christians in 20% of the world's countries since 2014 is concerning and that more should be done to combat religious persecution.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take further action to prevent and raise awareness of attacks on Christians, worldwide.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Stephenson, Official Report, 30 March 2017; Vol. 624, c. 511.]

[P002032]

The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Lord Ahmad) made the following observations:

The persecution of individuals based on their religion or belief remains of profound concern to the United Kingdom. The freedom to practise, change or share one's faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental human right, and the UK Government are committed to defending this human right and promoting respect and tolerance between religious communities.

The Foreign Office's work on Freedom of Religion or Belief

At country level, we lobby Governments for changes in laws and practices that discriminate against individuals on the basis of their religion or belief, and we continue to raise cases of persecution in individual countries. For example, Ministers and British diplomats recently raised religious freedom in Russia, following the Russian Supreme Court's decision to uphold a ruling that recognises Jehovah's Witnesses as 'extremists'. In Sudan, we have

lobbied consistently on behalf of four imprisoned Christian pastors, who have now been released, partly due to our efforts. During his visit to Pakistan in November, the Foreign Secretary raised the rights of all Pakistani citizens, including religious minorities.

We are deeply concerned about persecution of religious minorities in the middle east, where we have seen appalling crimes committed against Christians, Mandeans, Yazidis and other minorities, as well as the majority Muslim populations in Iraq and Syria. The UK is determined to seek justice for all the victims who have suffered as a result of crimes committed by Daesh around the world. At the 71st United Nations General Assembly in September 2016, together with the Government of Iraq and other international partners, the Foreign Secretary launched the campaign to bring Daesh to Justice. On the humanitarian track, Britain has pledged more than £2.3 billion to support those affected by the conflict in Syria, our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. In Iraq, we are working with the authorities in Ninewa to ensure that protection of minorities is properly addressed in their strategic vision for the region.

The UK works to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief at the United Nations. We are committed to promoting implementation of key resolutions, including Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, which focuses the international community on combating religious intolerance, protecting the human rights of minorities and promoting pluralism in society.

Our programme funds support our strategic aim to promote and protect Freedom of Religion or Belief globally. Under the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy, we are funding a project to develop lesson plans for secondary school teachers in the middle east and North Africa region to enable them to teach children about the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief. We are also continuing to support a network of human rights defenders in South Asia, and are beginning to build up a network of youth activists.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is a priority for the Prime Minister, who reiterated in her Easter message her conviction that we must "do more to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs openly and in peace and safety". In my new role as Minister for Human Rights, I am committed to working with my Ministerial counterparts and our diplomatic network to move this agenda forward through lobbying and practical action on the ground.

Petition

Wednesday 19 July 2017

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Climate Change

The petition of residents of Macclesfield,

Declares that climate changes impacts upon both people and places; further that on the global stage the

UK should exercise leadership in the implementation of the Paris Agreement, ensure coordination between government departments in the production and implementation of plans for emissions reduction with particular emphasis on local energy, cutting energy waste in homes and reducing the impact of vehicles on the environment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister to give priority to the urgent issue of global Climate Change.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002047]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 20 July 2017

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation

The following is an extract from the reply by the Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), to the Westminster Hall debate on Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation on 5 July 2017.

Rory Stewart: The British Government are doing an enormous amount—probably more than we are being given credit for in this Chamber—but clearly all the things we are doing are not sufficient to solve this crisis. The problem is—the hon. Member for Leeds North

East pointed this out—although it is true that we are spending only about £180 million in Yemen, we have to bear it in mind that, unfortunately, the situation in Yemen is not the only situation in the world.

[Official Report, 5 July 2017, Vol. 626, c. 169WH.]

Letter of correction from Rory Stewart:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Westminster Hall debate on Yemen: Political and Humanitarian Situation.

The correct response should have been:

Rory Stewart: The British Government are doing an enormous amount—probably more than we are being given credit for in this Chamber—but clearly all the things we are doing are not sufficient to solve this crisis. The problem is—the hon. Member for Leeds North East pointed this out—although it is true that we are spending only about **£139 million** in Yemen, we have to bear it in mind that, unfortunately, the situation in Yemen is not the only situation in the world.

